

OUR FOREST, OUR LIVES

25 *years of Tribal Development*



Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra

OUR FOREST, OUR LIVES

25 *years of Tribal Development*



Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra

2006

Suggested Citation :

Veena N., Prashanth N.S. and Vasu B.K. (2006)

Our Forest, Our Lives - Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra, B.R.Hills.

Photo Credits :

ATREE, Guruprasad, H. Sodersten, Jale Gowda,

Made Gowda, Prashanth N.S., Siddhanta Shetty

Sunitha Rao

Published by :

Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra,

B.R. Hills, Yelandur taluk

Chamarajanagar district

Karnataka, India - 571 313

Designed and printed by :

Ads India, Mysore

The present work documents the process of development in B.R.Hills. Please feel free to reproduce and disseminate the information presented here in any form. However, the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra would appreciate information regarding its use.



राष्ट्रपति के प्रेस सचिव

Press Secretary to the President

राष्ट्रपति मंत्रालय

एडुवैट भवन

नई दिल्ली - 110004

President's Secretariat

Rashtrapati Bhawan

New Delhi - 110004

MESSAGE

The President of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, is happy to know that the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra, B.R. Hills, Chamarajanagar is celebrating its Silver Jubilee.

The President extends his warm greetings and felicitations to all those associated with the Kendra and sends his best wishes for the success of the Silver Jubilee Celebrations.

PRESS SECRETARY TO THE PRESIDENT



RAJ BHAVAN
BANGALORE

March 3, 2006

Girijana

MESSAGE

I am glad to know that Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK) under the guidance of its Hon. Secretary Dr. H. Sudarshan has entered the 25th year of its service to tribal people this year and to mark the memorable occasion is bringing out a souvenir.

The attempt of the Kendra to operate in tribal areas and to reach out to thousands of marginalized and under-privileged individuals and groups so as to touch their lives in some way or the other is highly praiseworthy. The Kendra draws inspiration from the life and messages of Swami Vivekananda who had a comprehensive vision of improvement in the lives of the exploited, disprivileged, disadvantaged and neglected people. The objectives of the Kendra to put to practice the indigenous health systems, to establish an education system specific to tribal languages, culture and environment and to empower tribal communities through people's organisations merit appreciation and support from all. VGKK has worked out an impressive way of spreading its activities from a few districts in Karnataka to other parts of the country where there is concentration of tribal population through its empowerment and development programmes. While protecting and preserving the tribal culture of the people, their integration with the mainstream of national activity, participation in the nation building attempts and sharing fully the benefits of development with others cannot be ignored. This is of paramount importance that the benefits of State policies and programmes flow to them unhindered and in their completeness without gate keepers. I hope through its variegated agenda the helping hand offered by VGKK to the Government would facilitate the holistic and integrated development of tribal people in the country.

I congratulate the office bearers of the Kendra on their achievements and accomplishments and wish for increasing success in all their imaginative endeavours of farreaching social significance.

T. N. Chaturvedi
(T.N. CHATURVEDI)

PHONES/FAX (033)
2654-1144 / 1180 / 5391
2654-9181 / 9681 / 5700
FAX: 2654-4346
E-mail: office@rkmpresident.org
president@rkmpresident.org
Website: www.rkmpresident.org



Ramakrishna Math

PO, Belur Math, Dist. Howrah
West Bengal 711 202 India.

I am happy to receive your letter of 25th November. I am also glad to know that Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra is commemorating the 25th year of service towards the welfare of the less privileged sections of the society.

Swami Vivekananda envisaged that new India will emerge from the masses of India. From his lectures, letters and writings, we find that Swamiji had a comprehensive plan of community development through sustainable development of poor masses. The greatest challenge before us is to provide social justice to the rural people by ameliorating their socio-economic conditions. In this context NGOs play a vital role in demonstrating interventions towards improving the quality of life of rural communities. Through awareness generation and capacity development processes, they attempt to break the cycle of deprivation and poverty to enable rural poor to assert their rights and lead a dignified quality of life. While quality of life is an esoteric concept, certain elements of it can be captured by indicators of qualitative and quantitative improvement in employment opportunities and income levels; access to schooling and higher education; access to health services and hygienic living conditions.

I invoke the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swamiji so that the book may prove worthy of beseeching the concept of sustainable development of rural masses among the common people of our nation. I convey my love and blessings to you all.

Yours affectionately,

(Swami Gaharmananda)

President,

Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission

To
Sri Sudarshan
Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra
B.R. Hills, Yelandur Taluk
Dist. Chamarajanagar, Karnataka

PHONES PBX
(033) 2654 - 1144
(033) 2654 - 1180
(033) 2654 - 9581
(033) 2654 - 9681
FAX (033) 2654 - 4346
E-mail: rknhq@vsnl.com



RAMAKRISHNA MISSION

(The Headquarters)

P.O. BELUR MATH, DIST. HOWRAH
WEST BENGAL 711 202
INDIA

3rd January 2006

Dear Dr. Sudarshan

I am glad to learn from your letter of 28th December 2005 that Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra is completing its 25th year of dedicated service to the tribal people of B.R.Hills.

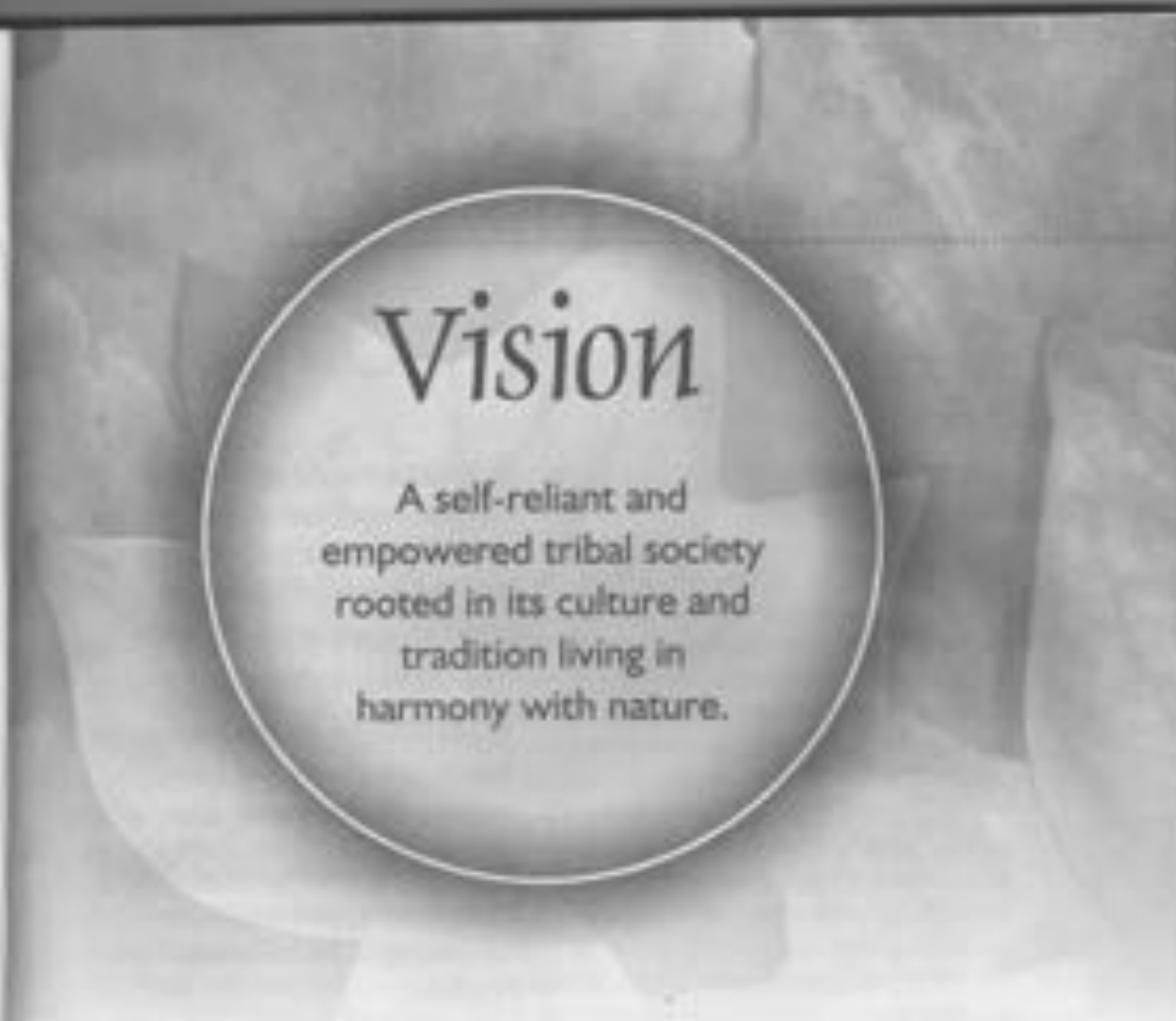
It is also heartening to note that the Kendra is extending its benevolent hands to distant Arunachal Pradesh and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

May this service activity grow from strength to strength is my prayer to Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

(Swami Smaranananda)
General Secretary



Vision

A self-reliant and
empowered tribal society
rooted in its culture and
tradition living in
harmony with nature.



Mission

Sustainable development of
tribal people through rights-
based approaches to health,
education, livelihood
security and biodiversity
conservation.



Objective

- ✓ To implement a comprehensive, holistic, need-based, gender- and culture-sensitive and community-centred system of health care integrating indigenous health traditions;
- ✓ To establish an education system that is specific to the tribal language, culture and environment;
- ✓ To promote biodiversity conservation and sustainable harvesting of Non-Timber Forest Produce;
- ✓ To ensure livelihood security through sustainable agriculture, vocational training and value addition of forest produce;
- ✓ To empower tribal communities through Sanghas (people's organizations) and Women's Self-Help Groups.

On looking back the 100 Kalyana Kendra's entire Soligas at Biligiri Rangana Hills, we spread to other finally to unreached tribals in Andhra Pradesh.

Inspired by Swami Vivekananda's driving force for the VGKK team that curative health would bring that, there were no preconceived VGKK's entire growth has been.

While handing out pills and that could only be filled by education began our work in the fields of some immediate problems, the health. When we look back, it theatre and road shows in the problems faced by tribal people outsiders, etc. Our involvement development. The realization tribal people can go together development. Thus emerged in

In this process of responding and learnt some lessons together experiments, some successful development.

In leading an organisation, community is our strength. We realised with the increased implementation levels.

There are two extreme anthropologists feel that tribes hand, government policies in India, most indigenous tribes perhaps the Sentinelese in the





Preface

On looking back the 'quest for well-being' encapsulates Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra's entire journey. A small effort to bring curative health to the Soligas at Biligiri Rangana Hills has over the years led to a large range of activities in health, education, livelihood and biodiversity conservation on a national scale. From B.R. Hills, we spread to other parts of the district, and then to neighboring states, and finally to unreached tribals in Arunachal Pradesh and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Inspired by Swami Vivekananda, the passion to reach out to the tribal people was the driving force for the VGKK team. The plunge into tribal health began with the assumption that curative health would bring solace and support to the marginalised people. Beyond that, there were no preconceived notions, no plans, no agenda... After that first plunge, VGKK's entire growth has been in response to the needs of the people.

While handing out pills and administering injections, we perceived the larger lacunae that could only be filled by educating the people, both formally and non-formally. And so began our work in the fields of education and preventive health care. Although it solved some immediate problems, there was a need for more. The answer was community health. When we look back, this was a colourful period with street plays, children's theatre and road shows in the forest. But it also brought us into close contact with the problems faced by tribal people such as poverty, denial of land rights, exploitation by outsiders, etc. Our involvement in socio-economic issues led us into community development. The realisation that biodiversity conservation and livelihood security of tribal people can go together was a major learning in this phase of community development. Thus emerged the phase of sustainable development.

In this process of responding to felt and expressed needs, we made some mistakes and learnt some lessons together - some sweet and some bitter. We conducted many experiments, some successful in the field, others successful in teaching us sustainable development.

In leading an organisation with such an eventful history, we have realised that the community is our strength. We at VGKK now feel that the dream of self-reliance is being realised with the increased involvement of tribals at both the decision-making and implementation levels.

There are two extreme schools of thought on tribal development. On the one hand, anthropologists feel that tribes should remain isolated and undisturbed; and on the other hand, government policies want total integration of tribals into the so-called mainstream. In India, most indigenous tribal people are already interacting with non-tribals (except perhaps the Sentinelese in the Andamans) and cannot be left alone as they are being



exploited. VGKK, therefore, believes in a rights-based approach of empowering them to assert their rights. This path places great significance on retaining the core culture of living in harmony with nature. Our main strength has been in our openness to learning from the tribals and respect for their traditional knowledge and practices. This has also led to the acceptance of several aspects of tribal traditional systems into our approach.

When VGKK was registered in 1981, little did we dream that we would learn so much, be so much richer, or touch and be touched by so many people in so many ways. What began as an individual's passion for tribal development inspired by Swami Vivekananda's ideas and Gandhiji's concept of development, today stands as an example of teamwork and dedication. This has been, for us, a 25 year long learning process along the road to well-being for tribal people. The road has brought us joy and fulfilment beyond imagination and expectations.

H. Sudarshan

Honorary Secretary

M. Jade Gowda

President



OUR FOREST, OUR LIVES

25 *years of Tribal Development*

1. The Bamboo People : Then and now	1
2. History of VGKK : Beginnings and evolution	9
3. Tribal Health : An integrated approach	21
4. Education : Primary and secondary	39
5. Education for Livelihood : Vocational and higher education	57
6. Community Organisation : Empowering tribal people	67
• VGKK : Colour snapshots	83
7. Biodiversity Conservation and Livelihood	89
8. Reaching Out	107
9. Podu to Parliament	113
10. The Road Ahead	119
11. The VGKK Family	123
• References	137

ing them to
are of living
g from the
led to the

it learn so
tary ways.
By Swami
n example
est along
fulfilment

owda





Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank M. Jade Gowda and Dr. H. Sudarshan without whose support this book would not have been published. We also thank Mr. H.N. Somasundaram and Ms. Jyothi who went through the manuscripts meticulously. Siddappa Shetty and C. Made Gowda from ATREE have also provided material and photos. Large parts of Chapter 4 have been derived from an earlier unpublished work by Dr. H. Sudarshan, Mr. H.N. Somasundaram and the teachers at VGKK school. We also thank Ms. K.R. Usha for editing support. We would also like to place on record the patience and encouragement of many staff members of VGKK, social workers and tribal leaders. Lastly, we would like to thank M/s Ads India, Mysore for their creative inputs.

Veena N. is a researcher and writer based in Bangalore. She has anchored the present work.

Prashanth N.S. is a Medical Doctor. He co-ordinates the health and biodiversity activities at VGKK. He has a keen interest in wildlife and is working on traditional knowledge systems of the Soligas. He has written Chapter 3, 7, 8 and 9.

Vasuki B.K. teaches English at the VGKK High School in B.R.Hills. He is one of the senior teachers at VGKK. He has contributed to chapters 4 and 5.



The Bamboo People

Then and now

"All the wealth of the world cannot help one little Indian village if the people are not taught to help themselves."

- Swami Vivekananda

In the forests of Southern India live numerous tribes who have remained isolated from mainstream Indian society because of their location and their way of life. The Soligas of Bilgiri Rangaswamy Betta (B.R. Hills) and Malai- Mahadeshwara Betta (M.M. Hills) are one such people. The rise and fall of various dynasties in the plains surrounding the hills made little impact on them. The 150 years of British rule did not really affect them, nor did the decades of independence.

They lived as their ancestors had done for centuries - in the midst of the forests - seeking and taking only as much as they needed from the forests and no more. Their relationship with the culture of the plains was minimal - they bartered some honey, tubers, fruits and medicinal plants for clothes, utensils and pottery. They spent their lives sowing and harvesting millets, grains and cereals; harvesting honey, wild fruits and berries in the forest; foraging for tubers, roots and shoots; and hunting small game.

Their lifestyle of shifting cultivation, foraging and hunting was in tune with the seasonal cycle of the forest. In the oral tradition common to indigenous people around the world, they recorded their knowledge in songs. Songs commemorating animals, insects, birds, flowers, rains, seasons, the sun and the moon were passed from one generation to the next thereby recording their observations and codifying their collective knowledge. Festivals, both seasonal and religious, were occasions for song, dance and community get-togethers which were well-attended. These get-togethers were designed such that the youngsters learned the songs from the older generation and young girls and boys could meet each other and chose their life-partners. In the absence of sexual taboos and rigid controls over the sexuality of women and young men (seen in all organised religions), courtship, marriage and reproductive choices were left to the couple, and not ordered by the elders.

Indigenous laws governed their interactions with nature as well as other human beings. Fruits and berries were harvested only from trees which flowered profusely and very ripe or very raw fruits were not collected. This method left enough fruits behind for

The Soligas believe their ancestors originated from the bamboo. The word 'Soliga', says Luiz (1963), is a 'corruption of the Tamil word colai or Solai (a thicket) and refers to the dense thickets in which they live.', and hence Soliga is 'the one from the Solai'. In short, both their oral history as well as a linguistic analysis reveals their close relationship with nature.





The forests in and around B.R. Hills have been known to support habitation for hundreds of years.

In fact, up to 153 megalithic burial sites have been unearthed within the sanctuary indicating human habitation since 1200 BC. Most of the sites seem to be near the Medicinal Plants Conservation Area and Muthuguda Gadda.



birds, small animals and insects that were also dependent on them. This prudence in the utilisation of natural resources is a part of their traditional practices, and extravagance and over-exploitation was foreign to them.

They also set traps and hunted chicken, wild boars, and other small game. They restricted themselves to a distance of about 1 km from their hamlet. Trees cut to clear the land for cultivation were used for firewood to protect their crops and houses from wild animals. Crop from their fields was offered to the gods first before being consumed by the people. They shared their food with friends, neighbours, and kin ensuring that everyone had something to eat. All disputes were judged by a jury of elders and justice was dispensed with compassion.

Instead of tilling the land with a plough, they used a hoe - a minimally invasive method of cultivating crops. After five-seven years, when the fertility of the soil reduced, the people would move to another place where the entire process would be repeated. A piece of cultivated land would be left untouched for 50-75 years, until the forest took root and developed there. Medicinal plants were known and all routine ailments were cured with these herbs, shrubs and roots. Traditional medicine was not effective in all cases and mortality was an accepted consequence.

The forest had enough to satisfy their needs and they were satisfied. Into this idyllic picture, reality intruded in the form of laws, which in one stroke, handed over the entire forest to the government. People who had lived for centuries were declared trespassers in the land of their ancestors, a land they had cherished and cared for, a land that they belonged to, as much as the animals in the forest: In contrast, people from the plains were given rights to extract natural resources like timber, granite and sand from the forest. Smugglers and poachers would enter the forests to hunt rabbits, deer, wild boars and peacocks.

Liquor traders were given licences to sell liquor in the tribal areas. Traders were given





licenses to buy minor forest produce and the tribals who actually collected it were forced to sell it to them only. Within this new philosophy of forest as a natural resource, the tribal was yet another animal to be hunted, killed and finally 'preserved', but sans any basic rights. In India today, highways, mines, hotels, resorts and coffee/tea estates in forest areas are okay (in fact, we can't do without them as they are critical to 'development'), but our Jadeya is not!!

Encounters with the law

The areas inhabited by the Soliga people were a part of the Kingdom of Mysore. In 1799, Mysore state was ceded to the British, represented by the East India Company. By an Act of the British Parliament, the entire wealth of India and the forests of the Soligas all became the property of Her Majesty Queen Victoria in 1858. After independence, the same laws continued to be in force and were even enforced vigorously. The slew of unjust laws continued to blatantly neglect the rights of the indigenous people. The Indian Forest Act (1927), Wildlife Protection Act (1972) and the more recent Biodiversity Act (2002). The forests were the property of the state and the Soligas were prosecuted for living there. They were persecuted by authorities who were charged with keeping the 'state' forests safe. Safe from whom - from the man without or the forest-dwellers!

B.R. Hills was declared a reserved forest and wildlife sanctuary in 1992. Following this, shifting cultivation, hunting, collecting firewood in the forests were strictly banned and the rules were implemented with great vigour and enthusiasm. Soliga hamlets deep in the forest were routinely razed by forest department officials on elephants or set afire. Each family was given a hectare or two at the periphery of the forest and expected to eke out a living in the plains. Those who were allowed to live in the forest, were forced to live in large settlements (for easier control) within the forest and denied the right to own and cultivate land. This placed a larger burden on the forest in the vicinity, and the sustainability built into the Soliga culture was forfeited. They were allowed to

collect Minor Forest Produce in the forests. In 2004, this was also banned following the degradation of forests in other parts of India. The fact that the forests in B.R. Hills were not degraded did not affect the implementation of the laws or its enforcement. Such all-encompassing top-

The Soligas' harmonious relationship with the forest was disrupted by the State.



Forest school: Children learnt to live in the lap of nature





A culture closely linked to the forest

down approaches are by now a characteristic of all national legislation.

All this alienated the Soligas from the forests and from their lifestyle, culture and tradition, which are closely linked to the forest. This alienation was followed by persecution by the forest department and neglect by the welfare departments. In contrast, the authorities charged with ensuring the welfare of the people such as the departments of health, education, nutrition, agriculture, land rights and housing totally neglected the Soliga people. As a result, the Soliga was left with neither the benefits of his tradition, nor the benefits of mainstream civilisation.

This entire set of laws and regulations stem from a basic belief that people and forests do not go together. This belief itself draws from a mindset that views the world, animals, other people and natural resources as 'belongings' that man can use for personal benefit. That this is not the mindset of the indigenous people who believe they do not 'own' anything, but must co-exist with flora, fauna and other life forms with minimal confrontation. Conservation and livelihoods of indigenous

people need not necessarily go in opposite directions, it could go hand in hand and it should.

Status of the Soligas in the late 1970s

By the 1970s, Soligas lived in four taluks in Chamarajanagar district of Karnataka state - Yelandur, Chamarajanagar, Kollegal and Gundlupet. The Soligas of Yelandur were forest dwellers and less used to the ways of the plainspeople, whereas those of Chamarajanagar, Kollegal and Gundlupet were relatively more in contact with the people and culture of the plains. These three taluks had a large proportion of Soligas in bonded labour, often bonded for life or even generations for borrowing a portion of paddy, or Rs. 100.

Often, the only contact between distant hamlets was for the purpose of marriage, and once a girl was sent off to her new home, they resumed living their isolated lives. There was little contact between individual hamlets of Soligas, though there was a strong sense of the Soliga identity. Within a hamlet, there was a sharing of resources unseen in other places. As long as even one family had food in the hamlet, nobody went to bed hungry. However, there was no organization of the community in its dealings with the external world. As a result, they were often exploited by government officials, private contractors, traders and politically, financially and socially well-placed people. The following section will focus on Biligiri Rangaswamy Wildlife Sanctuary as that is where the VGKK story began.







Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary

The Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary (77° - 77° 16' E & 11° 47' - 12° 9' N) is situated in the Chamarajanagar district of south-eastern Karnataka and covers an area of 540 sq. km. To the north lies Kollegal and cultivated land. Westward, the plains of Yelandur and Gundlupet separate the sanctuary from the Bandipur National Park. The Biligiri Rangaswamy hills comprises roughly four parallel hill ranges running in a north-south axis and forms a part of the hill ranges that connect the Eastern Ghats with the Western Ghats. These hills bear tropical moist deciduous forest, and at higher elevations, tropical evergreen forest. The hill-tops are covered with shola-grassland mosaic patches. Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Hills is a unique geographical entity (Srinivasan and Prashanth, 2005).

In the hills, there was no bonded labour, but there was exploitation of another kind.

The adivasis were totally untouched by the culture of the plains. They lived within the forest supporting themselves and their families with forest produce. They would hunt small and large animals, forage for tubers and roots and harvest wild fruits, honey and flowers from the forest. Additionally, they grew a portion of ragi (millet) and jowar (maize) for their personal consumption. As are the ways of the pre-monetized economies, the harvest would be followed by a get-together and an eat-together and the new food grains would be shared with kin and neighbours.



Visitors to the lake in BRT Sanctuary

Contacts with the outside world

The forest dwellers were so unfamiliar with the ways of the plainspeople (called 'nadavaru') that merchants would barter cheap utensils, clothes and jewelry in exchange for large amounts of crop and forest produce. Weaving, tailoring, metal works, pottery and wet grinding were all unfamiliar skills and crafts for Soliga women and men. Idli, the common snack of Southern India, was one such prize. M. Jade Gowda, the current President of the Governing Body of VGKK, recalls. When he was a child, an old Soliga woman who travelled to town regularly would buy idlis which she then sold for 10 paise a piece in their podu. She would also take goods in kind if the family had no cash.

Scared as they were of 'nadavaru', such intermediaries were one of the gateways through which the Soliga experienced the world outside the forests. Needless to say,





most of the middlemen were enterprising men traders from the plains and Soligas with enough courage to venture out were very few indeed. The other such gateway comprised of government officials from various departments - revenue, forests, agriculture, tribal welfare, mines, etc. This was an equally, if not more, exploitative relationship. Education of any kind and primary health care remained a far cry. These gaps further enhanced the scope for exploitation of tribals.

Forests: Among all the government departments, the forest department dealt most often with the adivasis and hence the instances of abuse most commonly recalled by the Soligas in B.R. Hills relate to this department. Forest officials would employ Soliga men as guards and coolies and pay them a wage that was lower than the wage they signed for, sometimes upto 50% lower. The Soligas were asked to put their thumbprints on official documents that showed they were paid a certain amount. Unlettered women and men were often not aware of the discrepancy between the amount they had signed for, and the amount they had received.

They were forced to work in the forests and not allowed to stay home even if they were sick. Additionally, the forest officials would regularly displace them by burning their houses or trampling them with tame elephants. They were caught, fined, jailed and beaten for collecting firewood, NTFPs or even just walking through the reserved forest. Soliga women and men remember that being beaten by officials of the forest department (for a range of reasons) was an everyday occurrence. If someone died because of this, it caused no sleepless nights anywhere. Rape of tribal women and forced sexual encounters were also reported.

The government policy then, as now, is to treat all forest dwellers as illegal residents in the forest, while at the same time 'selling' rights to mining and timber companies over vast tracts of forest land. People living on the plains also bought large pieces of forest land for plantations, orchards, etc.

The fact that the Soligas had lived there for several hundred years without destroying the forests was forgotten, while the devastation wrecked by 'legal' users (miners, loggers, planters, estate owners, tourists lodges, highway builders and users) was overlooked. This lethal combination of oversight, corruption and negative attitude towards tribals has led to the current situation all over India where all the forest flora and fauna, including forest people, are threatened with extinction.

Similarly, illegal logging by major contractors was allowed on payment of a bribe, whereas firewood collection or legal logging by a tribal for the construction of a house led to arrest, fines, and even jail.



Formal education remained a distant dream





Ineffective tribal welfare programmes: In its effort to better the lot of the tribals, the government regularly announced special benefits for them such as houses, roads, agricultural implements, etc. When the iron plough was given to the Soliga, it was a useless piece of junk for him. He had no use for it, as the Soliga did not plough their lands.

The official was usually followed by a trader who gave the Soliga a small sum of money and took the plough away. The Soliga was happy to get some money, the trader was happy to make a huge sum of money and the government was happy that it had delivered special benefits to the tribals. These traders were often in collusion with the government officials delivering the benefits.

Some of the benefits did not even make it up the hills. Only the papers went up, the thumbprint was taken and sent down to the officials in Bangalore and Mysore. The 'benefit' stayed in the plains and benefited only corrupt government officials, not the people it was meant for. These interventions were usually insensitive to the needs of the people and were planned and implemented without any knowledge of the conditions of indigenous people. Interventions driven by sympathy for the 'poor forest dwelling tribal' were neither need-based nor demand-driven.



Dr. Sudarshan in 1986

Doctor in the jungle

In December 1979, Dr. H. Sudarshan, a young doctor inspired by Vivekananda, came to work with Dr. Narasimhan in Ooty. He soon found that his work was not only satisfying, it was also enormously challenging. Dr. Narasimhan's work with the tribals prompted Sudarshan to offer his services to tribals. They were not merely poor, but also marginalised in India. S. Chakravarty, an administrator at the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple, took the doctor around to the podus. Other non-tribal local people like Jayakumar also took turns taking the doctor around.

The first challenge was to find patients. Scared as they were of outsiders, they would disappear at the first sight of anybody wearing clothes. Even the presence of the local temple authority did not reassure them entirely. The two young men often reached hamlets that were almost empty - its residents having run off into the forest or up the trees when they saw them coming. Jayakumar recalls carrying the medicines on his head and looking for patients in the dense jungles! Soon, with the help of Chakravarty and Jayakumar, and the support of the Vivekananda Sevashrama, Dr. Sudarshan started a clinic for tribal and non-tribal people. Such inclusivity is one of the hallmarks of VGKK to this day. Dr. Sudarshan's journey through tribal development is chronicled in the next chapter.

Age considers; youth ventures.

- Rabindranath Tagore



History Of VGKK Beginnings and Evolution

"Pay as much attention to the means as to the end."

- Swami Vivekananda

A small hut was constructed under the Sampige tree and Dr Sudarshan started his new hospital with two staff. Financial and moral support came from siblings, friends, relatives and the Ramakrishna Ashram in Mysore. Once the doctor and his assistants became familiar figures in the forest, fear gave way to curiosity and then to acceptance. Along the way, several dramatic cures helped increase his acceptance.

Worm infestations treated with anti-helminthics resulted in the fall of huge clusters of worms. A snake-bite treated with the text-book first aid remedy of sucking out the venom through an incision made a major impact. And finally, a man with bear attack wounds was sutured and he survived. As news of the doctor and his 'magical' medicine spread, more and more tribal people started coming to the hospital in B.R. Hills for treatment.

Most often, the hospital was where the doctor was. The doctor lived in a small thatched hut, which also doubled as the hospital. He often sat outside his hut treating outpatients. A small two-bed ward was constructed next door. The doctor and his one-man paramedical staff walked from hamlet to hamlet taking medicines to the people's doorstep in their 'walk-mobile'. Krishna Vattam, a journalist from Mysore, visited B.R. Hills and wrote an article titled 'Inspired by Swami Vivekananda' in Deccan Herald. This led to donations from all over the state in both cash and kind.

They visited hamlets in B.R. Hills - Doddarepodu, Kallara betta, Dodsampigepodu, Kalyanipodu, Manjigundi, Yerkangadde, Krishnana Katte podu, Devarahalli, Muratipalya and Shanivaradamurati - regularly and made friends with the traditional community leaders like the Cheluvadi, Yajamana, and others. The most common illnesses were



Hut on the rock

The photo was first published in Deccan Herald





nutritional anaemia, sickle cell anaemia, diarrhoea, falls, cuts and wounds. Once the traditional leaders were convinced, they were able to convince others.

Living permanently in B.R. Hills, Dr Sudarshan was able to study the people and the impacts of his intervention. He found that medical interventions did not bring any lasting changes in the lives of the Soliga people. He felt that they needed more. They needed education, empowerment and livelihood support. They needed all this to improve their own well-being and also to put an end to their exploitation at the hands of outsiders. The single room was soon put to use each night as a school.

Six children - M. Jade Gowda, C. Made Gowda, Ramachandra, N. Jadeya, Mariana Keta, Sannarange Gowda - all aged around 6-8 years old enrolled. They learnt the three Rs - reading, writing and arithmetic - each evening from Dr Sudarshan. When there was food, the doctor and the children ate well. When there was no food, due to lack of funds or delay in transport, they cooked and shared a bowl of watery ragi porridge and continued to work.

Huche Gowda, a contractor, was a devotee of Swami Nirmalananda who lived in B.R. Hills. He had undertaken a government contract to construct a road from B.R. Hills to Chamarajanagar in the late 1970s. A Gandhian, he wanted to bring development to the tribal people. In the course of their work, Dr Sudarshan and Huche Gowda came to know each other and started working together. While Huche Gowda has never held an official position in the organisation, he has been a totally dedicated supporter whose advice is sought on every issue. His support has ranged from bringing in good people, funds, helping with the construction of buildings, supporting tribal students who study in Chamarajanagar and counselling staff and students at VGKK.

Swami Sureshanandji, the president of Ramakrishna Ashram in Mysore, continued to support the children at VGKK in every way he could. Used clothes from their hostel found their way to B.R. Hills. After retirement, he moved to an ashram in B.R. Hills right next to the VGKK campus, Ramakrishna Kutir. The Ramakrishna Mission in Mysore continues to support VGKK. Every year, VGKK students are hosted at the Mission in Mysore during their annual excursion. Swami Prabhuddhananda of the Vedanta Society in San Francisco, Swami Bhajananda of Belur Math and several other monks also helped in many ways.

Establishment of Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra

As news of the young doctor who lived in the hills spread to the world beyond, people who often dreamt of doing such work flocked to support him - for as long as they could.



Surgery in the forest: Dr Sudarshan at work





This brought various people from all walks of life - youth, retired professionals, and karmayogis - as volunteers in various capacities in VGKK. This culture continues to this day and VGKK benefits hugely from such people who devote a small, yet productive part of their life to the Kendra.

The romance of the lone young doctor living in the hilly forests still catches the imagination of the reader. It was also a momentous decade in India when Dr Sudarshan's contemporaries were doing similar things all over rural India inspired by Marxist, feminist and socialist ideals. Philanthropists like Vijayam Krishnamoorthy, Dr Pais, Dr M.L. Ramesh, Sudhakar Joshi and Christian Kruger and social workers like G.S. Jayadeva, Huche Gowda, Prasanna Kumar, Gurudutt and Shashikala Muniyappa also came forward to support him. Some, like H.N. Somasundaram, went on to shoulder distinctive responsibilities in the organisation and become very dear to the people here.

The Soliga leaders, Dr. Sudarshan and his friends felt the need for an organisation to help the Soligas and better their lives. After many deliberations, it was decided to register a Voluntary Organisation for the development of Soligas in a holistic and comprehensive way. On 19 October 1981, Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra was registered with Cheluvadi Made Gowda as President, Dr H. Sudarshan as secretary, G.S. Jayadeva as treasurer, and Made Gowda, Dodda Nanje Gowda, Bedi Nanje Gowda, Jadeya B. (from Purani podu), Pande Gowda and Nanje Gowda as members. The registration number is 93/81-82.

The romance of the young doctor living in the hilly forests still catches the imagination of the reader. It was a momentous decade in India.

Dr. Sudarshan's contemporaries were doing similar things all over rural India inspired by Marxist, feminist and socialist ideals.

Evolution of VGKK

The institution that started as a vehicle of curative health soon found itself responding to the needs of the community and evolving in ways that were not envisioned at the beginning. While curing people, it was also found that there was a need to disseminate basic knowledge about hygiene and prevention of diseases. This led VGKK into the field of community health. People were informed of the benefits of water sanitation, green vegetables and appropriate health care at their podus through street theatre. This community health initiative reaped good results. However, even this was not sufficient.

It brought to fore problems such as malnutrition, which was one of the major problems affecting the people. Hence efforts to increase nutrition through better income and employment began in earnest. This was the beginning of VGKK's experiments with a range of income-generating activities such as digging elephant-proof trenches, providing vocational training, value-adding to forest produce, etc. To generate income, sericulture, dairy farming, cash crops, fishing and handicrafts were introduced at the homestead level. Vocational training was also started to teach skills which were unknown among the Soligas - mat weaving, bamboo craft, spinning, weaving, agarbathi making, book binding, printing, candle-making. These were introduced to ensure that people with various





Street plays by school children was the most commonly used media

abilities were able to exploit them for their own benefit.

With these activities, VGKK was already in the realm of community development. Building approach roads to distant hamlets, houses for tribals, schools, providing solar lights, etc. only took VGKK further into this field. This continues to this day with VGKK being involved development activity through a rights-based approach including building human and physical resources, demanding rights, lobbying at district and state level, protests against liquor licenses, quarrying and other injustices.

The work in community development helped the Kendra to realise that external inputs do not work unless the internal mechanisms for democracy, self-reliance and self-help develop. This brought VGKK to the concept of sustainable development, where the development is need-based and demand-driven. It is the community that decides what, when, where and how it wants something; not donor preoccupations or the government. The evolution of VGKK from Curative Health to Community Health to Community Development to Sustainable Development, Livelihood security and Biodiversity Conservation makes for a fascinating study.

The early years - health and education

By the end of 1981, VGKK as an organisation decided to further develop its two initiatives: the hut on the rock into a more permanent hospital building, and the informal night school into a regular school. These activities were pursued in 1982 and a school was started with about 20 students from the neighbouring podus, including the first six. Vivekananda Girijana Higher Primary School (VGHPHS) was inaugurated in June 1982 by the then minister for education in Karnataka Nagamma Keshavamurthy. The project director of the District Rural Development Agency, Sudhir Kumar, sanctioned funds for a low-cost school building. Since S. Chakravarty had already done his teacher training, he was in charge of the school. A 10-bed hospital was constructed with funding from Vijayam Krishnamoorthy and christened Jayavijayam Tribal Hospital. This was inaugurated on 4th May 1983.

A Mother and Child Health (MCH) programme was started in 1982 with the support of Dr Gerry Pais of Organisation for Development of People (ODP), Mysore. Uma Devi, who was working with Development through Education (DEED) in Hunsur, moved to B.R. Hills to do this work. She also started a nursery and looked after the little children there. Uma recalls the early days when the children came to school only for the free lunch offered to them. The mornings would be spent in cleaning them up with soap and water, scrubbing them down with stones, cutting their nails and hair and teaching them the basics of personal hygiene. In a few months, they learnt to bathe themselves and each





other. But the focus of their school day was still the mid-day meal! This remained true for a long long time.

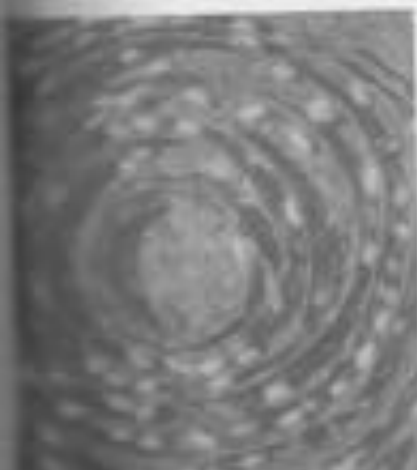
To support themselves, the school and hospital, the children and staff together grew vegetables and crops. Experimental ventures into silk-worm rearing and bee keeping were also undertaken, which brought in over Rs 1,000 a year. The children in the hostel were self-sufficient and took turns to cook, clean, collect firewood, tend the vegetable patches, silk worms, poultry and beehives. There was no scientific information about what crops, vegetables or fruits would succeed in the climatic and soil conditions of B.R. Hills. They had to learn every thing the hard way - through trial and error. They field tested all the income-generation crops - coffee, ginger, turmeric, mulberry, bees - at demonstration plots and successful techniques were passed on to the Soliga community.

Soon, in 1983, the Christian Children's Fund office in Bangalore offered support to tribal children and their families. Positive reports in the media also brought in support from the government. Such diversified sources ensured that funding for VGKK would not be donor-dependent and the entire project would be sustainable in the long run. This also allowed the board of directors to decide the direction and activities of the organization and they did not have to follow the latest trends in 'development'. In addition to the board of directors, VGKK benefited greatly from the support of institutional and individual philanthropists, well-wishers, and Gandhians in the region. Mysore Medical College (MMC) and J.S.S. Medical College (JSSMC) have maintained a long relationship of sending house surgeons to VGKK for training in community health.

Community development

Work in the priority areas of health and education revealed more urgent needs, like income- and job-generation. In 1982, the forest department wanted to dig an elephant trench in Kollegowdana podu. The PWD estimate for a mechanised execution of this work was Rs 1 lakh. Kolle Gowda, Dr Sudarshan and Cheluvadi Made Gowda convinced the government to let the tribals dig it themselves thereby generating employment. The government sanctioned Rs 60,000, of which Rs 36,000 was used and Rs 14,000 returned to the government. This marked the start of VGKK's involvement in infrastructure development activity.

Over the next 23 years, low-cost houses, gobar gas plants, approach roads, solar street lights and lanterns, wells and drinking water facilities and watershed programmes were undertaken to increase the well-being of the Soligas living in and around B.R. Hills and M.M. Hills. In all 750 appropriate technology houses were built with the support of EZE. Orchards and kitchen gardens were developed in hamlets to increase nutrition levels. Medicinal plants were also encouraged and use of traditional herbal medicine was propagated. The Soligara Abhivruddhi Sangha, the community organisation wing of VGKK, and a





unique model of people's empowerment, was involved in the getting tree pattas, land pattas, seeds, pensions, and other benefits to tribal people.

In 1983, a dairy was started in VGKK with 20 cows and the Indian Overseas Bank gave a cow to each family. This milk was collected by VGKK dairy and the Soligas were paid every week. This helped to increase their nutrition levels as milk was available for



Sometimes it took a litter of pups to bring the children to school

consumption, and they also earned cash to buy food. However, the absence of a Fair Price shop in the vicinity meant that it still took a couple of days to get food as they had to go to Yelandur to buy food at reasonable prices. Sidduraiah, who was the secretary of the dairy, was asked to set up a small store with essential items for better nutrition and hygiene of the tribals. The non-profit shop was right beside the dairy and people collected their money and bought food immediately.

To increase their standard of living and nutrition, Soliga youth were also trained in other income-generating activities like fisheries, sericulture, bee-keeping, dairy farming, poultry, agriculture and agro-forestry. This was designed to ensure that they had

access to a wider range of resources and did not depend entirely on forest resources, which would result in over-harvesting. Kalappa was the force behind the agricultural and agro-forestry activities of VGKK. He and his student helpers demonstrated and taught tribals to grow cash crops so that they are able to obtain a higher cash income in the commodities market: coffee, turmeric, pepper and ginger are some of the cash crops that have been experimented successfully.

In 1989-90, the children at Vivekananda Girijana High School (VGHS) successfully grew coffee and ginger in a plot of one acre. Following the success of this demonstration plot, VGKK office bearers approached the government for support in disseminating this technical know-how to the tribals. The next year, about 25 tribals were given coffee seedlings to plant in their own land. This ensured the long term socio-economic betterment of these families. Similar experiments were conducted in other fields and other families benefited from this. Such a diverse resource base ensured that all of them did not face problems at the same time and were able to help one another when required.

Community organisation

As VGKK's primary activities (health, education, community development) stabilised, the board of directors started looking into the structural inequities that plagued their lives. Despite all this work, it was clear that the injustices and problems continued as before. There was clearly a need for further activities. Cheluvadi Made Gowda suggested that they start the process of community organisation to help the Soligas to fight for their rights. The voices of the Soliga people, he said, needed to be heard. For this, it must be





loud enough. This volume could only be acquired by unity. "Let us construct Sanghas," he said. This was in 1984.

Charting out a route to organise the Soliga community that was spread over forests and plains in three districts, four taluks and the border between two states was a tough job indeed. But it had to be done, and so it was done. The success was not instantaneous. It took over two years of groundwork by inspired and dedicated social workers. When success came, it took them all to a new high ground. Suddenly, in 1986-87, VGKK and its community organization, Soligara Abhivruddhi Sangha, grabbed the headlines in all the local and national newspapers and magazines. Shivaraje Gowda, Krishna Moolya and Sheena Shetty were the brains and strength behind this activity.

Slowly, the organisation reached out and enveloped all the Soligas in Chamarajanagar district. One of the major early strategies was the Jana Samparka Sabhe, where officials in various government departments were invited to meet the people. This brought them directly in touch with the grassroots and they were more responsive to the needs of the people. Officials in banks, forest department, education department, tribal welfare department, agriculture and veterinary department and local government bodies were invited to such meetings. Such meetings were also used to distribute benefits like tree pattas, saplings, loans, land, and houses to tribals.

The Sanghas work at various levels - hamlet, taluk, district and state - and they also mobilise people to fight for their rights, such as the recent action against the ban on Minor Forest Produce. They raise awareness about health, education, social and community development issues and motivate people to follow the right path.

Sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity conservation

As most of the tribals depended on the forest for their sustenance, it was essential that the benefits of modern science be utilised to make their livelihood sustainable in the long run. Hence, trainings and projects were conducted in sustainable harvesting, biodiversity conservation, green farming and agro-forestry. The importance of the forest in the lives of tribals cannot be overstated.

In the early 1980s, forest people got only a very small portion of the final selling price of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) like honey, gooseberries, soap nuts, soap berries, etc. Traders bought the forest products from the tribals at cheap rates and then pocketed the profits. Further, value addition to these products was done outside the forest. As such, the bulk of the profits went to the value-addition centres which were located outside the forest. Both these problems were sorted out in collaboration with the government by setting up two societies.



The climate in B.R. Hills is ideal for coffee





The state government initiated a cooperative of Adivasis called Large-Scale Adivasi Multi-Purpose Society (LAMPS) to control trade in forest produce. It also empowered Soligas by putting the middlemen out of work. LAMPS purchased the harvest from the Soligas at a reasonable rate and then sold it through a tender process. The VGKK team was the main force behind LAMPS in B.R. Hills. Dr Sudarshan, the secretary of VGKK, was the promoter of LAMPS for the first five years. During this time, the procurement price of honey was raised from about Rs 8 to Rs 45 per kg in 2005. The profit made by LAMPS is given back to the members.

It was then decided to add value to forest products within the forests. This was done

through a cooperative called Sri Biligiri Soliga Minor Forest Produce Cooperative, set up in 1986 with 869 members. Units were started to process honey and convert berries and roots into pickles, jams and juices. This programme had twin benefits - generating employment in tribal areas; and retaining a larger portion of the final profits within the forest. Employment is seasonal as forest produce is not available round the year. About 30 people are employed directly, but all the members of this cooperative get a share of the profits.



Teaching through theatre

This was done in collaboration with Dr Kamalje Bawa of Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI), who later started the Bangalore-based Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment (ATREE). The partnership between VGKK and ATREE has led to a sustained engagement with the tribal community for the conservation of the forests in B.R. Hills. The success of this endeavour has been appreciated in India and abroad in both scientific and wildlife circles. This partnership has also helped in the spread of new techniques in agriculture and agro-forestry.

From a hut on the rock to a 20-bed hospital

Over the past 25 years, VGKK has seen endless growth and activity both in the hills and elsewhere. A short history of the infrastructure development will be useful to trace the development of the organisation and express our gratitude to those who made it possible. After the first hut under the Sampige tree, a second hut for the children's dormitory was built on 2 acres of land donated by A.N. Yellappa Reddy. The first concrete building was constructed with the support of the education department of the Government of Karnataka and local well-wishers. The long building was built in 1982 and housed the two teachers and students as well. The next year, the hospital was constructed with the support of Vijayam Krishnamoorthy, a perfume merchant in





Bangalore. Willem Scholten of HIVOS also came forward to support VGKK and a shed was constructed with their support. This building was used as a kitchen-cum-dining hall for about 10 years and is now a cowshed.

All the unskilled and some of the skilled labour was executed by the founders, staff, students, friends and well-wishers of VGKK. Dr Sudarshan himself learnt the art of construction and the school teachers, social workers and children once constructed an RCC roof during a torrential monsoon. Hired labour was used only for the skilled work involved like masonry, RCC roofing, etc. Soligas from each podu contributed shramadaan under the coordination of Cheluvadi Made Gowda and the yajamanas of each podu. The children contributed their bit by carrying sand and cement to the masons. And the staff and directors pitched in at all points to ensure that the work was completed on schedule.

A prayer hall was constructed with mud walls and thatch roof in 1984. Other small huts were constructed for children to get together and play indoors. The children nicknamed it *miaru-paisada-mane* (three paise hut) as it was shaped like the three-paise coins. These houses were demolished in the late 1990s to make way for stone structures to house the library, museum and the laboratory, when VGKK received support from Evangelische Zentralstelle für Entwicklungshilfe E.V. (EZE).

The tryst with Veerappan

Veerappan, the infamous smuggler and poacher, haunted the B.R. Hills - M.M. Hills range for over 20 years. During this period, the police, forest department and Special Task Force and even the Border Security Force commandos all tried to catch him, unsuccessfully. Political support, thick forests and tribal sympathy were all cited as reasons for his success in eluding capture. Finally, the STF shot him dead in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, on October 18, 2004.

His favourite tactic was to kidnap public personas including film stars, journalists and politicians. Intelligence reports indicated that Dr Sudarshan was one of the four candidates for his kidnap-and-negotiate strategy. Dr Sudarshan then offered to go and stay with Veerappan in the forest as long as he wished, only there would be no ransom. He believed in the potential of each human being to be good and wanted Veerappan to change his life and his ways.

Dr Sudarshan's real concern was about the inhabitants of the forests who suffered silently. Tribals who had lived in the region for centuries were trapped between two heavy fists - government forces and Veerappan. The sex ratio of elephants in the B.R. Hills - M.M. Hills range changed drastically as tuskiers were selectively shot dead for their ivory. But quarrying, poaching and smuggling activities in the region ground to a halt and after his death, quarrying and poaching have started again, much to our sorrow.





Born on 30 December 1950, Sudarshan lived and studied in Yendur near Bangalore in a Kannada medium school. He was a normal bright child till the age of 12, when the trauma of his father's death changed his life forever. They were visiting a village on Vijayadashami day. His father suddenly had a heart attack. Young Sudarshan ran to get the local quack who was the closest thing to a doctor the village had. Despite all this, his father passed away, as he says, 'literally on my lap'. That day he decided to become a doctor.

His readings of Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer also left a deep impression on his mind, and the service ethic they embodied was ingrained into him. He passed his pre-university with good marks, but could not gain admission to a medical college as he was below 16. He spent a year working in a flourmill and joined Bangalore Medical College the next year. He also started visiting the Ramakrishna Mission in Bangalore where he met H.N. Somanandaram. While studying medicine, he regularly met Dr Narasimhan who was working with Panjabis and Thodas in Ooty.

Deeply influenced by the life of Swami Vivekananda, he took dherksha from Swami Virubhawanandaji Maharaj, the then President of the Ramakrishna Mission. He worked in various places with the Ramakrishna Mission including Mayanati in the Himalayas, Belur Math in West Bengal, Ponnampet in Kodagu district of Karnataka. After 5 years, with the blessings of his guru, he decided to work in B.R. Hills. The Ramakrishna Mission continued to support him in his mission.

His early years at B.R. Hills were filled with insurmountable challenges and small successes. Quick to anger and quick to forgive, he led by example. He maintained accounts, made tea, performed surgeries, built houses, and even chased elephants! When buildings had to be constructed, he learnt the art of construction. When stones had to be lifted into place, he was there to lift them. He made tea at 5.30 am each morning to motivate others to make up early - just to drink it hot! On cold mornings, hot tea was a strong incentive.

An incentive was certainly needed as the staff of 17 was paid with Rs 1,800! They would work 15-18 hours a day on a salary of just Rs 50 or Rs 100. The mission mattered the most. Also, when the boss himself took no money, it was difficult indeed to ask for a raise! Colleagues who travelled with Dr Sudarshan had to lend him money regularly, as he would forget to carry money.

New to the jungle, he was yet to learn that discretion is the best part of valour. When a herd of elephants wandered into the VGKK campus, he tried to chase the elephants out! His colleagues knew better than to try that! They discreetly climbed up the nearest tree or hid behind one waiting for the elephants to make their own way out. No amount of anger or cajoling from their beloved doctor would make them try to herd the wild mammoths. Many such stories are recalled with glee whenever the old-timers meet. But all agree that it was his tremendous energy and dedication that made VGKK what it is today.



Dr H. Sudarshan





Born on 22 April 1942, H.N. Somasundaram worked as a civilian employee at a Defence establishment in Bangalore for 20 years from 1962-82. He spent his day ensuring that the quality of electronic items that reached our troops was impeccable. The work was interesting and satisfying, but for Somasundaram, it was his work at the Ramakrishna Mission in Basavanagudi that was fulfilling. This is where he met Dr H. Sudarshan, a young MBBS student with high ideals, who volunteered at the Sunday school in the late 1960s. He was given the job of cleaning, which included leading rooms of children to ensure that the premises remained spotless.

The Head and the Heart

HNS, as he is popularly known, was a student and then a Sunday school teacher at the Ramakrishna Mission from 1953 where he taught non-formal classes to children. Vinkatesh Marthy, K.N. Sitarum, Gorinda, HNS and some other friends formed the Sri Vivekananda Sera Ashrama. When Dr Sudarshan started his hospital in B.R. Hills, HNS took leave from work to help him out. He never went back to his job. He stayed on, to advise, support and mentor the young doctor - a true friend, philosopher and guide. He was the other half of the VGKK leadership. With his simple lifestyle, experience in worldly matters and people skills, he complemented Dr Sudarshan's dynamic leadership perfectly.

His gray hair and simplicity earned him the respect of tribal elders who could not understand young people like Dr Sudarshan and his team. Whether it was parleying with tribal leaders, meeting government officials or even simply soothing a naughty child after punishment, HNS was the man for it. Smoothing ruffled feathers was something of a specialty? He accomplished with love and affection, tasks that could not be achieved through discipline, training or anger. Students at the school knew they always had his ear. As one student said after confessing to his wayward ways to HNS: 'Others will beat me, but you won't.'

Students who were punished got a kind word and a pat from him without fail at the end of the day. He believes in the goodness of each human being. As M. Jude Gomda says: 'He believed that I had the capacity to pursue higher studies and that made me also believe it.' He helped the Soliga youth aspire for higher goals, gave them the courage to dream and to soar. When a boy missed school regularly, he sneaked up to his house at night and waited till the child had finished his dinner. Then he spoke to him gently and asked him to come to school regularly. It worked, when scoldings, cajoling, beating by the teachers had not!

The sponsorship programme and the Vocational Training Centre were his special projects. He could be seen going from shop to shop in Bangalore buying materials for use by the trainees in VTC. He would carry all the materials back to B.R. Hills. He was often to be seen with the trainees, telling stories and jokes and through them, lessons. Just for his sake, tribal boys and girls would come to work early and work late. Nobody wanted to break his trust. How could they tell him they could not do something, when he believed in them so completely?

The best part of his day was, however, spent in story-telling. Whether it was staff or students, they all had lessons to learn. Whatever the lesson, he had a story to teach it with! He worked hard to establish Tribal Joint Action, a federation of voluntary organisations working for the tribal people.





A new prayer hall was constructed in 1986 and was also used as a hostel, dining hall, classroom, meeting room and a general multi-purpose building as the number of students in the school shot up to 350 that year. The construction of these buildings was supported by HIVOS. A high school building was constructed in 1988 with the continued support of HIVOS. A lab was set up within this structure. This building was expanded in 1995 after Kirtee Shaw, an architect, and one of the trustees of Ashoka Foundation, interviewed Dr Sudarshan and came to see the campus. He designed and mobilised funds from EZE in Germany for 12 classrooms, a prayer hall, a multi-utility space, computer lab, headmasters' office, staff room, etc.



A view of the dormitories designed by Kirtee Shaw

Eight dormitories and two guest houses were also designed by Kirtee Shaw and supported by EZE of Germany. The dormitories were designed to simulate the community-living style of the Soligas, promote space-sharing and cooperation and blend in with the environment in the hills. The conical roofs of the structures promote concentration and focus among the children. Climbing up and down the bunker beds was both fun as well as exercise. The large windows allow natural light and air, while the high roofs ventilate the buildings. The buildings are low-cost constructions using locally available stone and rubble. The random rubble blocks reduced the cost of each building to a mere Rs 2.2 lakh, while the

estimates made by the education department placed it at Rs 15-16 lakh. VGKK has pioneered several low-cost housing technologies both within the campus and in the tribal hamlets.

Staff quarters were also constructed as and when the need to house more people arose. Typically, all the houses are small and minimalistic in design. Huchche Gowda, an old friend of VGKK, designed the first set of houses and built them. Another set of buildings was designed by Kirtee Shaw and currently houses eight of the senior-most staff at VGKK. It was constructed in 1996 with support from HIVOS. In 2003-4, three more dormitories were constructed with support from the Government of India. A new hospital has just been constructed with support from the Government of Karnataka and individual donors.





Tribal Health An Integrated Approach

"Once looked upon as a healing art, medicine is looked upon today as the sum total of all activities of a given society that tend to promote, restore and maintain the health of the people. Where such a concept prevails, medicine includes more than a physician's action; it becomes 'Community Health'."

- Park, John Everett

Health was the VGKK's portal to community development in B.R. Hills. Curative health care was the beginning of the Kendra, and the organisation itself had its humble origins in the 'hut on the rock', where Dr. Sudarshan began his work in 1979. Initial apprehension about the new 'tablets' and 'injections' for illnesses were conquered with dramatic cures.

The hospital has been central to the work of the Kendra. The 20-bedded hospital

Forest encounters

Forest-dwelling Soligas are exposed to animal attacks, snake bites, and other natural hazards. Other injuries like tree-falls, and accidents while collecting non-timber forest produce are also common. However, the resilience and the threshold for pain is very high among the Soligas.

While returning home with his wife after grazing his cattle, Mada was pounced upon by a sloth bear. Even while the bear was upon him, his wife Jademadi displayed an unusual sense of courage and presence of mind. She used her sickle to grievously wound the bear over its back. Mada was admitted at the VGKK hospital with a fracture on the edge of his hip bone, which eventually healed. The slight limp still reminds him of the time when his wife mauled the bear, that mauled him! Mada is quite a happy man today.

Lakuma smiles as he recollects the time when he was hit by a bison. He remembers walking dazedly to the clinic with a large towel around his abdomen. When Lakuma untied the towel to reveal his 'guts', Dr Vinay Taunk and Dr. Sridhar were surprised to say the least! Emergency surgical intervention by Dr Vinay at VGKK and referral to K.R. Hospital saved his life. It is but a memory for him today, but he still maintains a safe distance from bisons!





running today caters to a large population of tribals in this belt and tribals from distant hamlets in M.M. Hills and neighbouring Tamil Nadu avail of free medical care at the hospital. The hospital is fully equipped with necessary infrastructure - laboratory, x-ray facility, operation theatre and a well-stocked pharmacy. The hospital maintains detailed case records of the tribals in the area, and computerisation of the records is ongoing. The records provide details of consultation, allergies, sickle cell status and other vital data about the individual. Such records have been maintained since 1991.

The Silver Jubilee year will see the hospital shifting to a new building facing Somarasana Kere. Incidentally, the new hospital stands right in front of the very 'hut on the rock' where VGKK had its beginnings. It is well equipped with 3 separate blocks - outpatient, in-patient (wards for men and women) and another building with a labour room and an Operation Theatre. The hospital will also house emergency medical and para-medical staff.



Blood smear showing sickle-shaped RBCs

Sickle cell anaemia

One of the first observations made by Dr. Sudarshan was that the Soligas suffered from a genetic disorder called Sickle Cell Anaemia. The disorder was first described among African tribes with significantly low susceptibility to malaria caused by *Plasmodium falciparum*. It probably evolved as an adaptation against the high mortality caused by falciparum malaria. It occurs in a mild (heterozygous) and a severe (homozygous) form. In the severe form (homozygous), the individual may die very young due to a 'sickle cell crisis'.

The 'sickle' haemoglobin that is present in affected individuals polymerises under stress within the red blood cells, which then acquire a characteristic 'sickle' shape that can be seen under the microscope. This change is brought about under conditions when the blood oxygen levels drop from normal as in severe exertion/ infections/ dehydration, etc. These sickle-shaped cells lack the manoeuvrability of the normal haemoglobin while navigating through the smaller blood vessels and capillaries, and thus have a short life span leading to anaemia. In addition, severe crises can result when the sickle-shaped cells clog the blood stream leading to other complications. Various studies report close to 30 - 37.8 % prevalence of the sickle cell trait among the tribals in this belt (Ramasamy et al 1994, Negi 1967).

The hospital has a rigorous sickle cell anaemia screening programme wherein the sickle cell status of the Soligas is duly recorded in their permanent case record maintained at the hospital. To date, 5,250 people have undergone the screening. Research and documentation of this 21-year-old programme is ongoing. Several other people contributed to VGKK's efforts in the field, including Dr R.L. Kirk from the University of Canberra, Australia.

People with homozygous sickle cell anaemia are regularly advised to avoid any prolonged physical stress or exertion such as long treks or walks, maintain good hydration





and treat any infections quickly. Along with this, foods rich in folic acid like Jamun (*Syzgium* sp.) and green leafy vegetables are recommended. In addition, folic acid tablets have now become a routine supplement for many of the Soligas with this disorder.

The best method to detect this is electrophoresis. Expensive as it may sound, the equipment at the laboratory demystifies electrophoresis for sickle cell anaemia. This was designed by H. Udaya Kumar who took the initiative in 1984 to develop a low-cost electrophoresis instrument with appropriate technologies to determine sickle cell anaemia status. The instrument is used to this day.



The electrophoresis instrument testing blood samples

"From inability to let alone; from too much zeal for what is new and contempt for what is old; from putting knowledge before wisdom and science before art and cleverness before common sense; from treating patients as cases and from making the cure of the disease more grievous than the endurance of the same, Good Lord, deliver us."

- Sir Robert Hutchison

Rational drug use and holistic medicine

Practices like injections without indication and over-enthusiastic antibiotic usage are the bane of modern medicine. Since the beginning, the hospital has had an explicit policy of not taking up such irrational practices, in favour of rational, evidence-based drug use, and interventions based purely on indications. This was codified into a rational drug use policy in collaboration with Dr Mira Siva of the Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI).

Additionally, a basic premise of 'no-conflict' with the local traditions has been followed in all interventions. Local traditions, beliefs and deities have an innate value and respect and play an important role in care and support. After health workers in VGKK found that traditional medicine and faith were as important as allopathic medicines in effecting a cure, patients were routinely treated with a tablet, a home-made herbal infusion and a prayer to God.

Dr. Jayanthi, then an Associate Professor of Pharmacology at St. John's Medical College, Bangalore spent a few months at VGKK modernising and computerising the pharmacy management practices with interventions such as BIN card system, centralised stocks, guidelines for indenting and 100% availability of essential drugs.

Health on wheels: The VGKK mobile unit

A mobile health unit visits the far-flung hamlets spread all over the sanctuary and inaccessible forest areas. The team consists of a doctor, pharmacist/health worker and a driver. All essential drugs are available in the mobile unit. The unit had humble beginnings with Dr. Sudarshan carrying medicine bags and visiting remote tribal hamlets on his walk-





VGKK's first mobile van: Going where no wheels have gone before

Uncle Mahadevaliah

Mahadevaliah, a Soliga from Kovanakere at the foothills of M.M. Hills, joined VGKK as a young man of 20. He has ever since been a dedicated health worker and has stayed for years in remote hamlets spreading awareness on health issues.

He has now been the mobile health unit for the last 6 years. Many other tribal youth - Basappa, a male nurse,

Bomma, a health worker and Muttiah, a teacher - were drawn towards community action in health by Mahadev. Revered by the Soligas and the staff, he is lovingly called 'Maava' (Uncle) by them. When he informed Dr Sudarshan that he would like leave to get married, he was granted 30 minutes leave! He got married and returned to work in an hour! Soligas like him will take the spirit of VGKK wherever they go.

mobile. This one-man-two-bag unit graduated slowly to a four-wheel drive jeep that covers hamlets in the remote forest areas of M.M. Hills, Satyamangalam (Tamil Nadu), foothills of Bandipur and Kollegal.

The Soligas are seen at the hamlet and people who require hospitalisation are brought back in the vehicle. The health worker, meanwhile interacts with the community and enquires into the problems at the hamlet. In addition to providing medicines, the unit has a unique identity among the tribals, and they readily open out their problems with the team which includes a Soliga health worker. The unit participates in the Pulse Polio programme and supplements the government effort in taking the programme to the most inaccessible tribal hamlets. On the whole, the unit is the bridge between the Kendra and the thousands of Soligas spread all across the forests.

In 1984, a man from Havinamule in Kollegal taluk was brought to the hospital in a makeshift stretcher after a bear bite. The doctor was out with the mobile van. With no doctor on the premises, the nurses were taking care of him. It so happened that the health minister H.L. Thimme Gowda and his wife were visiting VGKK. As both of them were doctors, they treated the patient. The minister experienced first hand the importance of rural doctors.

The same day, he issued an order that all house surgeons should be trained in community health. Since then, house surgeons from MMC and JSSMC Hospital are being posted to B.R. Hills for training. Since 1984, MMC

and JSSMC have been posting house surgeons to VGKK for internship in community medicine. St. John's Medical College in Bangalore also sent house surgeons for a brief period. Some house surgeons stayed on even after completing their training - walking miles through the forest, eating when food was available, and serving the people. Roopa,





Therapeutic value of tradition: Nanja's tryst with the elephant

Nanja from Kanneri Colony was mauled by an elephant in 2003 while collecting 'Pusse' (lichen) in the forest. It was indeed a 'brush with death' and had a strong impact on his mind, in addition to a collection of 'blood and air' around his lungs. Dr. Sridhar inserted a chest tube to drain the collection. Although cured of his physical affliction, Nanja was suffering from disturbed sleep, nightmares and had become irritable. He had developed an Acute Stress Reaction to the 'life-threatening' accident with the elephant.

Before commencing conventional treatment for this, he was sent away to perform a special puja to the Doddappa deity and was offered 'sacred ash' by the 'Thammadi', a senior Soliga priest. He subsequently underwent treatment at the hospital along with the daily 'sacred ash', and together they helped him recover from

Jayshri, Sandhya, Asha, Sakina Banu, P.D. Vinayak, Satish Naik, Mahesh, S.Pushpa and Veena Bharathi are still remembered fondly for their determination, selfless service and impeccable work ethics. Dr Roopa Muniyappa, Dr Sridharan, Dr Vinay Taunk, Dr Jyothi, Dr Raghavendra Swamy, Dr Vasudeva Rao and Dr Shiv Prasad - were among those who came to serve the Soligas for a while. VGKK was an instrument for their service.

In addition, various visitors, who have heard of VGKK either by word of mouth or in the media have spent time at VGKK as volunteers or just as 'students', learning from our experiences in health care in resource-poor settings. Staff Nurses, social workers, foreign medical graduates and many research students have contributed in their own way.

"There are no pills for poverty."

- Dr. H. Sudarshan

Community health

The early 1980s, when the hospital was established, was the phase of curative health for VGKK. This was an important time in the history of public health in the country, when many other organisations were having similar experiences in public health. Various health projects all over the country, particularly Dr. Ravi Narayan of Community Health Cell found that the needs of the community were far beyond 'Freedom from illness'. They would not find their answers in medicine. It was a similar experience for Dr. Sudarshan at VGKK. VGKK was experiencing a



Basappa, a health worker, counselling a woman in her hut





paradigm shift from illness-based health care to preventive health and community health.

An epidemic of whooping cough swept Purani podu in 1983. Curative health services was a weak first step. The need of the hour was effective immunisation. This marked the beginning of a new chapter in VGKK - Preventive health care. An active programme for nutrition, anaemia control, and implementation of all national health programmes were implemented. Many of the Soliga elders still clearly recollect the time, when a community-based nutrition and anaemia control programme was taken up. Immunisation, health awareness, nutrition, and sanitation became the new 'pills'.

However, even this was only a partial solution to health problems. It was realised that

the attainment of health was closely tied to the socio-economic conditions of the community. It was observed that poor livelihood security, illiteracy and various issues like rights over land and forests were closely linked to the health of the Soligas. Community-based health programmes among the Soligas were started to bring people together to analyse the root causes of their health-related problems and to 'take health into their own hands' through organised action. In instances where unjust government policies have worsened the health situation, community health programmes have joined with popular struggles for fairer and more representative governments. VGKK has been a hotbed for such action where people's collective 'struggle for health' has led to organised action to correct inequities, unfair practices and unjust social structures.



Healthy theatre: A street play being enacted by health workers at night

National health programmes

VGKK has been instrumental in implementing national health programmes in remote tribal areas of BRT wildlife sanctuary, and the paramedical staff continue to actively participate in the Pulse Polio programme. In a unique experience with tuberculosis, a comprehensive programme sensitive to local needs was evolved by the VGKK health team based on the National Tuberculosis Control Programme. Years of awareness raising has demystified Tuberculosis and its treatment, and Directly Observed Treatment Short-term (DOTS) under the Revised National Tuberculosis Control Programme (RNTCP) is now in place.

With more and more people from outside coming to B.R.Hills, tuberculosis became a problem. Moreover, the importance of treatment for 6 to 9 months in regularly spaced intervals was recognised as important. Drawing a lesson from the success of the closely supervised Leprosy Elimination Programme, Dr. Sudarshan thought of a similar system for Tuberculosis. The leprosy programme required the setting up of drug delivery points with one of the drugs given in a single monthly supervised dose. With Soligas, most of the





other doses also had to be supervised. Although, this translated to increased effort, it bore immediate results in terms of leprosy control. A DOTS-like regimen was strictly implemented by VGKK at BR Hills. This was of course, much before the Revised National Tuberculosis Control Programme when DOTS became the norm for all patients with the disease (Sudarshan and Sridharan, 1995).

To implement the regimen effectively, Dr. Sudarshan and Dr. Sridharan worked hard to increase awareness in the patients, the family and the community. TB ceased to be merely a medical problem and was identified as a social issue. Whenever required, community action and inter-sectoral collaborations were called for by involving the neighbours, panchayats, police and forest department officials to support the medical personnel in preventing defaults and ensuring compliance.

Reproductive and Child Health services

Conducting deliveries in the squatting posture is a traditional practice and even now most of the deliveries among Soliga women are conducted in squatting posture with the help of traditional birth attendants. The gravity factor and the better contraction of the pelvic muscles in this posture help the mother to deliver the baby easily. The modern obstetric table seems to be more convenient for the doctor and the nurse than the mother! Soliga mothers have very few obstetric complications because of this posture and several good 'Mother and Child Health' practices.



*Reproductive and child health care :
The best of tradition and modernity*

Traditional dais are very skilful and even perform 'external versions' to rotate the foetus with abnormal presentation inside the womb so that the baby is delivered easily. In a study conducted into the advantages of the traditional birth practices, it was found that episiotomies for primigravidas (first pregnancy), as advocated in the western textbooks probably has a limited role in tribal areas. Incidence of perineal tears (a complication if episiotomy is not done) was very low. In addition, it was found that in spite of premature rupture of membranes (> 48 hrs), the incidence of infections was also very low.

The number of mothers developing an indication for Caesarean has been very low, thus adding credence to their traditional birth practices. The traditional birth practices are time-tested and most of them are based on proven methodologies. This testifies to the relatively low maternal mortality in areas where these practices are still followed.

Rheumatic Heart Disease control with Narayana Hrudayalaya

Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD), the most serious complication of rheumatic fever, follows an attack of bacterial pharyngitis in a small percentage of children. As many as





other doses also had to be supervised. Although, this translated to increased effort, it bore immediate results in terms of leprosy control. A DOTS-like regimen was strictly implemented by VGKK at BR Hills. This was of course, much before the Revised National Tuberculosis Control Programme when DOTS became the norm for all patients with the disease (Sudarshan and Sridharan, 1995).

To implement the regimen effectively, Dr. Sudarshan and Dr. Sridharan worked hard to increase awareness in the patients, the family and the community. TB ceased to be merely a medical problem and was identified as a social issue. Whenever required, community action and inter-sectoral collaborations were called for by involving the neighbours, panchayats, police and forest department officials to support the medical personnel in preventing defaults and ensuring compliance.

Reproductive and Child Health services

Conducting deliveries in the squatting posture is a traditional practice and even now most of the deliveries among Soliga women are conducted in squatting posture with the help of traditional birth attendants. The gravity factor and the better contraction of the pelvic muscles in this posture help the mother to deliver the baby easily. The modern obstetric table seems to be more convenient for the doctor and the nurse than the mother! Soliga mothers have very few obstetric complications because of this posture and several good 'Mother and Child Health' practices.



*Reproductive and child health care :
The best of tradition and modernity*

Traditional dais are very skilful and even perform 'external versions' to rotate the foetus with abnormal presentation inside the womb so that the baby is delivered easily. In a study conducted into the advantages of the traditional birth practices, it was found that episiotomies for primigravidas (first pregnancy), as advocated in the western textbooks probably has a limited role in tribal areas. Incidence of perineal tears (a complication if episiotomy is not done) was very low. In addition, it was found that in spite of premature rupture of membranes (> 48hrs), the incidence of infections was also very low.

The number of mothers developing an indication for Caesarean has been very low, thus adding credence to their traditional birth practices. The traditional birth practices are time-tested and most of them are based on proven methodologies. This testifies to the relatively low maternal mortality in areas where these practices are still followed.

Rheumatic Heart Disease control with Narayana Hrudayalaya

Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD), the most serious complication of rheumatic fever, follows an attack of bacterial pharyngitis in a small percentage of children. As many as





Vimalana, a tribal girl was operated last year for congenital heart disease

39% of the patients with acute rheumatic fever may develop varying degrees of heart problems (pancarditis) with associated heart valve problems (insufficiency), heart failure, pericarditis, and even death. With chronic rheumatic heart disease, patients develop valve narrowing (stenosis) with varying degrees of regurgitation, enlargement of heart chambers, arrhythmias, and ventricular dysfunction. Chronic rheumatic heart disease remains the leading cause of mitral valve narrowing and valve replacement.

Acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease are thought to result from an autoimmune response, but the exact pathogenesis remains unclear. Worldwide, rheumatic heart disease remains a major health problem. Chronic rheumatic heart disease is estimated to exist in 5-30 million children and young adults; 90,000 patients die from this disease each year. The mortality rate from this disease remains 1-10%.

Dr. Devi Shetty of Narayana Hrudayalaya committed himself to a detection and treatment programme for Rheumatic Heart Disease among the tribals. This was coupled with camps at Gumballi and Kollegal for heart diseases, with cardiologists and a battery of para-medical personnel from Narayana Hrudayalaya equipped with mobile echo equipments. Six patients, including a child, have been operated upon free of cost by Narayana Hrudayalaya. Regular follow-up is being arranged at the Telecardiology CCU at Chamarajanagar district hospital.

In addition, the RHD control programme also involves preventive aspects - the mobile team spreads awareness about early detection and treatment of pharyngitis and the importance of hygiene and cleanliness at homes. Once the proposed village

resource centre comes up at B.R. Hills, telemedicine facilities with Narayana Hrudayalaya will be further strengthened.

Enable and empower - the tribal RCH programme

The Auxillary Nurse-Midwife (ANM) is the fundamental unit of primary health care in India. The country has more than a lakh sub-centres, each catering to a population of 3,000-5,000. However, the tribal podus are spread over large distances and the sub-centres designated to these podus remained isolated from the large sections of the populations they were supposed to serve. Moreover, non-tribals were not willing to serve in these remote locations. Even where they did, sensitivity to local culture and traditions was lacking. Thus, the interior podus did not have access even to basic health care and the implementation of the national health programmes in these areas suffered.

The ANM being the final common pathway for the delivery of any national





"Our Health in our hands" - Tribal women as Auxiliary Nurse-Midwives (ANMs)

Bhagya grew up in Kanneri Colony and studied in the VGKK school. After high school, she along with 20 other Soliga girls enrolled in a special one-year Tribal ANM course at K.R. Hospital, Mysore. She completed the training and has eventually taken the responsibility of a sub-centre consisting of 4 tribal villages with a population of 600. She is now trained in all the health programmes and provides reproductive and child health services in these podas. She and the other girls are models for educated Soliga girls and are an example of empowerment.



programme envisioned at the centre, was thus identified as the point of intervention. The essential admission criteria for ANMs were strict and entailed a minimum qualification of 12 years of schooling. This precluded most of the tribal women who lacked avenues for higher education given their remote location. But, what was needed in these areas was a committed health worker with sensitivity to the needs of the tribals and the necessary skills and training in RCH.

A model of enabling and empowering tribal girls as ANMs was explored in 1994-95. Under this, 51 tribal women from Chamarajanagar, Mysore and Coorg districts were sent to K.R. Hospital, Mysore and trained as ANMs. The training concentrated on capacity building in RCH and other national programmes. However, the Nursing Council of India refused to recognise this course. This meant that they could not be inducted into government service. Dr. Sudarshan lobbied at various levels for piloting a Tribal Reproductive and Child Health Programme and it was granted under the India Population Project - IX, wherein 16 ANMs trained under the above programme are allotted tribal sub-centres in Chamarajanagar, Kollegal and Yelandur taluks.

These are specially designated sub-centres with 500-1,000 population, as against a population of 3,000 that the regular ANM caters to. This has led to more effective implementation of the national programmes. The ANM's report to the local PHC and to VGKK and attend the monthly meeting held at VGKK on the 1st day of every month. The ANMs are very well accepted into the community and the programme has improved access to primary health care and RCH services in many remote tribal areas. The model of Tribal ANM is now under consideration for replication at a national level for all tribal and remote areas.





Jallesiddamma

Healer, helper, scholar



Jallesiddamma of Yerkanagadde podu was a Soliga woman who was one of the finest traditional health practitioners. She was a trained tribal birth attendant (dai), and also attended to a lot of other community health problems. She had a deep knowledge of the forests, medicinal plants, and plant preparations.

Everything from exotic flowers to homely spices were valued in the traditional healing system practiced by tribals like Jallesiddamma. Every herb had a time and method of harvest to maximise its healing potential. Unlettered, Jallesiddamma used the phases of the moon (full moon and new moon) to calculate days, months and schedules. A tribal calendar inspired by people like her was first documented in *Soliga - The Tribe and its Stride* (Somasundaram and Kibe 1990). It is still used by the tribal ANMs to determine expected date of delivery.

Despite the intervention of so-called modern ideas, she persisted in maintaining the squatting posture for delivery and convinced the doctors of the efficacy of the traditional method over the modern method of lying down which is more convenient for the doctor than the mother. Jallesiddamma was the fourth daughter of Ale Gouda and Julemadamma of Kadigere. In the forests, she learnt very early which fruits, seeds, berries, flowers, leaves, trees and roots were edible, and which were not. From her father, a traditional healer, she learnt the special properties of medicinal plants.

From her mother, also a traditional healer and mid-wife, she learnt all she could about the human body and its ailments. She accompanied her mother on her house visits and her apprenticeship was very rigorous. Her parents travelled widely within the forests of Chamarajanagar and with them, she went everywhere. This knowledge stood her in good stead in later





years as she always knew where a plant or herb needed for her herbal remedies grew.

When Ketamma's labour started, but no baby appeared, Jallesiddamma diagnosed a breech birth and turned the baby around within the mother's abdomen leading to normal delivery. When Basamma was distressed because of problems within the home, Jallesiddamma not only counselled her, but also her husband, in-laws and parents.

Realising the importance of ensuring a happy and peaceful state of mind in the young mother-to-be, the entire family cooperated. A complete health professional, she was closely knit into the lives of her patients not just curing them, but teaching them basic hygiene, good nutrition, prevention and essentials of healthy living. Jallesiddamma worked closely with the doctors at VGKK hospital referring complex cases to them for a second opinion and the doctors returned the favour.

Dr. Sudarshan recollects the time when Ketamma was brought to the hospital for delivery. He sent for the mid-wife. The lesson Jallesiddamma taught him that day remains fresh in his mind to day. He has ever since advocated the tribal method of delivery in squatting position. Most women gave birth in their own homes with the help of their mothers, aunts and sisters. As there was no lady doctor at the VGKK hospital for a long time, Jallesiddamma and her daughter, Jademadamma assisted at all births irrespective of whether it was in the home or the hospital. In all, she delivered about 1,500 babies in the region, meticulously recording the date, time and case details in her record book. Her daughter Jademadamma recalls a case when the baby was born but the placenta remained undelivered for many days. Jallesiddamma, with a little help from her daughter, got the placenta out and the mother and child thrived after that.

According the local legend, Jallesiddamma could tell the sex of the baby without any ultrasound machines and astounded even the most sceptical mind with this ability. However, she was also aware of the social issues surrounding the girl child and would not reveal the sex of the foetus to all. She would induce labour when it was delayed, with a decoction of a few homely spices found in every Indian kitchen. Tribal couples who could not have children consulted her and her treatment, coupled with a strict diet, worked magically. Word of her abilities spread and people came from as far away as Mysore to consult her for infertility. Jallesiddamma herself gave birth to 16 children, 8 of whom still survive. She was honoured with the Karnataka Rajyotsava Award for her services to tribal people in 2000. Jallesiddamma passed away on May 25, 2004, but her daughter Jademadamma and trained ANMs like Bhagya take the tradition forward.





Nagarathna counsels an expectant mother and her family members

prevalence in the general population, there is a need to mainstream HIV/AIDS into the general health services. The ANMs now routinely advocate counselling and testing for HIV/AIDS at the Voluntary Counselling and Testing Centre at the District hospital for all tuberculosis patients. Though not a problem yet among the Soligas, the ANMs are urged to take up awareness programmes about HIV/AIDS.

Community participation and mobilisation of local resources are an important component of basic health services. The ANMs have a strong community presence and have formed Village Health Committees. They regularly interact with the Self-help groups, teachers, Anganwadi workers and Panchayat members. In times of need, they have sought the support of forest department and STF personnel to transport expectant women in cases of emergency.

Tribal health

The lifestyles and relationship with forests play an important role in the tribal healthcare system. Soligas who live in the core area of the forests with access to forest resources maintain much better health than the Soligas who are alienated from forests. Forest-dwelling Soligas did not suffer from appendicitis, colonic cancers, sexually transmitted diseases, vitamin deficiencies, ischaemic heart diseases, Diabetes (type 2) and other stress/lifestyle related diseases (Ashok Sahni & Sudha Xirasagar 1990). On the other hand, these very same diseases have started appearing in tribal people who are alienated from the forests (Sudarshan, 1997).



Rohini, a tribal ANM, now at Yerekatte sub-centre recalls the time when Made Gowda's sputum was positive for tubercle bacilli. She had then motivated several others with chronic cough to get their sputum examined. Rohini began DOTS for him for the period of 6 months and he was declared cured. Rohini now attributes the 10-odd TB patients on treatment with her to the late detection of TB in Made Gowda. She has ever since made it a point to refer all tribals with symptoms for sputum examination.

HIV/AIDS was considered to be prevalent only among high-risk groups earlier. However, with the changing focus towards its



Eat for health - Lessons from the Soligas

Nutritious food is a part of the Soliga culture and their diet includes a repertoire of plant and animal material rich in essential macro and micro nutrients. It includes:

- 21 species of green leaves*
- 8 species of tubers*
- 14 species of fruits*
- 8 species of seeds*
- 4 species of flowers*
- 7 species of mushrooms*
- 10 varieties of spices*
- 4 varieties of honey*

They cultivate 5 species of cereals, 5 species of pulses, 5 species of tubers, 2 species of oil seeds and 5 species of green leafy vegetables. Whole grains are powdered and consumed. The Soligas also consume pulses and vegetables. The high roughage in their diet helps them in preventing colonic cancer, appendicitis and constipation. The green leafy vegetables take care of their dietary needs of Vitamin A and iron. Amaranthus is the most commonly used leafy vegetable - the leaves, seeds and stem are all consumed. They have very little fat in their diet; hence obesity is almost unknown in the community. They consume plenty of Jamun (Indian Blackberry), which takes care of the folic acid needed for the generation of RBCs especially in patients with sickle-cell anaemia. Even a child knows how to differentiate between edible and non-edible mushrooms. At three years, a child would know how to find edible tubers in the forest. The Soligas use herbal pesticides to preserve seeds and grains. Hence their food is totally free from chemical pesticides (Sudarshan 1997).

All things which are old need not necessarily be true, and all things new need not be without fault. To be wise, both should be acceptable only if they stand the test of time.

The unwise, however, are easily swayed by others.

- Kalidasa

Medical pluralism

Traditional health practices have flourished in India for hundreds of years. They include codified systems like Siddha, Unani and Ayurveda as well as informal herbal treatments that have been a part of the oral tradition. People have been treating themselves over centuries in these inexpensive ways. In the past 50 years, there has been a sudden shift into expensive foreign medicine - allopathy.

VGKK recognises the importance of each of these systems of medicine. There have





Soliga Forest Pharmacy



Some medicinal plants widely used by the Soligas:

- **Turnbe** (*Leucos aspera*): Headache herb, whose leaves are ground and poured into the nose
- **Yebbatumbe** (*Leucos zeylonica*): Leaves of herb have good antiseptic value for wounds and cuts.
- **Dadasalu** (*Grewia tiliaefolia*): Bark of tree used on hair, especially for dandruff
- **Bejja** (*Anogeissus latifolia*): Bark of tree along with the resin is softened in water, and taken for Leucorrhoea (white discharge from the vagina)
- **Navaladi** (*Virex altissima*): Deworming agent. Bark of tree is boiled in water, and decoction drunk for abdominal pain.
- **Sipre** (*Asparagus racemosus*): Root of this herb dried, powdered and taken with water for fatigue, especially in pregnancy.
- **Kaggali** (*Acacia catechu*): Root of tree is powdered, and a moistened paste applied on the forehead for headaches
- **Tore maavu** (*Mangifera* sp.) and **Nerale** (*Syzygium cumini*): Bark of tree powdered and taken with water for diarrhoea
- **Mande Sige** (*Acacia concinna*): Tender leaves of this climber are boiled and taken to

hence been efforts to integrate various systems of medicine - Ayurveda, tribal medicine, homeopathy and allopathy in our clinical practice, drawing the best from each depending on the choice of the patient and the kind of illness. Dr Mahesh, a homeopath, treated tribals in the B.R. Hills base hospital for over 2 years, before moving to the PHC in Gumballi to increase outreach. In the realm of tribal medicine, our efforts have been more intense.

Indigenous knowledge

Soligas use more than 300 herbs for the treatment of various ailments. VGKK is documenting their knowledge - concepts of health, disease and healing. VGKK has also taken up a programme for the 'Conservation of Medicinal Plants' to conserve the medicinal plants in this area.

There are herbal remedies for non-poisonous bites, stings, allergies, fungal infestations, and skin problems. Severe reactions to bee sting is virtually unknown. The traditional health system of the Soligas is so impressive that several people have studied it in detail. The Bangalore Ayurvedic College has brought out a whole report on the subject (Yoganarasimhan et al 1983).

Common practices include applying castor oil to the body and exposure to the sun





increase/initiate milk production. A decoction prepared from this is used to induce labour pains in those with delayed labour.

- **Uttari** (*Achyranthes aspera*): Root of herb is powdered and made into a decoction for quick post-partum (post-delivery) recovery.
- **Joojakki** (*Lantana indica*): Fruits of herb eaten for strong, healthy teeth.
- **Nelli** (*Embilica officinalis*): Leaves of tree are ground, and the paste is used for diarrhoea.
- **Nagadale** (*Ruta graveolens*): Leaves of herb are ground, and the paste applied on the head for fever, cough, and respiratory tract infections.
- **Kakke** (*Cassia fistula*): Bark of tree ground to a paste and applied on burn appetite in burn victims wounds, and even given orally to promote appetite in burn victims.
- **Panchapatre** (*Albizia parviflora*): Juice of leaves

of this herb applied on blisters formed after burns.

- **Bevu** (*Azadirachta indica*): Multi-purpose medicinal tree, good for skin problems (fungal and viral infections like chicken pox).
- **Alale** (*Terminalia chebula*): Fruit of tree widely used in severe cough, respiratory, and fungal skin infections.
- **Lolesara** (*Aloe vera*): Leaves of this fleshy herb widely used for menstrual problems, and skin eczemas.
- **Tulasi** (*Ocimum sanctum*): Herb widely used in respiratory infections.
- **Dalimbe** (*Punica granatum*): Fruit peels of this tree used orally for controlling increased menstrual bleeding.

From: Prashant M.S. and Ramachari H 2006
Soliga Forest Pharmacy in Forests Alive
(Padmanabhan et al. 2006)

which is supposedly good to ward off tick infestation. Various folk medicine preparations are used for symptomatic treatment. Herbs with diuretic properties, those known to act as astringents, and expectorants are widely used. Poultice of ragi flour (ragi hittu) is used for treating abscesses. For broken bones, they use a herb which when ground with saliva and applied, sets like plaster! *Kaliharalu* (*Calotropis* spp.) is a plant that is used very effectively in cauterisation.

Conservation of medicinal plants

The medicinal garden on the VGKK campus has been set up with the purpose of cultivating some important medicinal plants. VGKK has stressed the importance of local health traditions, of the urgent need to conserve rare and threatened species of medicinal plants, to have a nursery of medicinal plants, and to carry out documentation work in collaboration with the Foundation for the Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) based in Bangalore.

A herbal garden has been established within the campus demonstrating some of the important herbs used by the Soligas to treat routine complaints. 'Adusoge' (*Adathoda vasica*) is used extensively both amongst the Soligas and by the hospital as an expectorant for cough. The health workers and the nurses in the hospital collect leaves from the plants





growing on campus and prepare fresh Vasaka decoction for the patients.

Presently, a three-tiered approach is in place at BR Hills wherein at the first level, the community handles the routine medical problem itself, applying the time-tested principles of traditional medicine. At the next level is the health worker, who provides health education and treatment for minor ailments. And for those problems that require professional care, the health worker brings the patient to the hospital. This tribal-health worker-hospital model prevents undue dependence on 'modern' medical systems and is culturally, socially and economically sensitive to the needs of the people.

Health security - meeting the challenge

A unique model of community health insurance has been in operation since 2003 in B.R. Hills. Under this scheme (Karuna Trust-UNDP Health Insurance scheme with National Insurance Company), most of the Soligas insured themselves and now, the general

awareness amongst them about insurance is high. Indeed, it was a model to show that health insurance for the masses is a workable concept with high social dividends, in terms of a healthy society. The scheme was unique in having certain previously unaddressed concepts being given due importance - wage loss during hospitalisation and 'out-of-pocket' expenditure that the patients and their attendants incur even during stay in a government hospital.

To date, about 9,400 Soligas have been insured and have availed of the scheme to the tune of Rs 2 lakhs. A "No disease exclusion" policy, wage loss compensation and immediate settlement are its key features. As an economic component of this health insurance scheme, Soliga women are being empowered through community micro-finance initiatives, channelled through newly formed Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Presently, the Soligas address their routine health problems themselves. They can avail of credit from the SHGs for outpatient services and are availing Health Insurance services to meet hospital in-patient expenditure.

This scheme has played a vital role in ensuring health security to the Soligas. Kethe Gowda, 26, is a tribal from Devarahalli near B.R. Hills. He is the only earning member of his family. When he developed gangrene in his left foot, it required

amputation and he had to be shifted to K.R. Hospital at Mysore about 100 km away. Wage loss and out-of-pocket expenditure would normally have made it impossible for him to avail treatment. This could have had grave implications for his family but for his health insurance coverage.

"We were not very happy to pay for insurance as we are poor and every rupee is important to us.

Later, when I was admitted in hospital for chest pain, I got a good sum of money as compensation when I was discharged. I was very happy. This money more than compensated for what I had spent initially on the insurance."

- Siddamma, Soliga tribal from BR Hills.





growing on campus and prepare fresh Vasaka decoction for the patients.

Presently, a three-tiered approach is in place at B.R. Hills, wherein at the first level, the community handles the routine medical problem itself, applying the time-tested principles of traditional medicine. At the next level is the health worker, who provides health education and treatment for minor ailments. And for those problems that require professional care, the health worker brings the patient to the hospital. This tribal-health worker-hospital model prevents undue dependence on 'modern' medical systems and is culturally, socially and economically sensitive to the needs of the people.

Health security - meeting the challenge

A unique model of community health insurance has been in operation since 2003 in B.R. Hills. Under this scheme (Karuna Trust-UNDP Health Insurance scheme with National Insurance Company), most of the Soligas insured themselves and now, the general

awareness amongst them about insurance is high. Indeed, it was a model to show that health insurance for the masses is a workable concept with high social dividends, in terms of a healthy society. The scheme was unique in having certain previously unaddressed concepts being given due importance - wage loss during hospitalisation and 'out-of-pocket' expenditure that the patients and their attendants incur even during stay in a government hospital.

To date, about 9,400 Soligas have been insured and have availed of the scheme to the tune of Rs 2 lakhs. A "No disease exclusion" policy, wage loss compensation and immediate settlement are its key features. As an economic component of this health insurance scheme, Soliga women are being empowered through community micro-finance initiatives, channelled through newly formed Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Presently, the Soligas address their routine health problems themselves. They can avail of credit from the SHGs for outpatient services and are availing Health Insurance services to meet hospital in-patient expenditure.

This scheme has played a vital role in ensuring health security to the Soligas. Kethe Gowda, 26, is a tribal from Devarahalli near B.R. Hills. He is the only earning member of his family. When he developed gangrene in his left foot, it required

amputation and he had to be shifted to K.R. Hospital at Mysore about 100 km away. Wage loss and out-of-pocket expenditure would normally have made it impossible for him to avail treatment. This could have had grave implications for his family but for his health insurance coverage.

"We were not very happy to pay for insurance as we are poor and every rupee is important to us.

Later, when I was admitted in hospital for chest pain, I got a good sum of money as compensation when I was discharged. I was very happy. This money more than compensated for what I had spent initially on the insurance."

- Siddamma, Soliga tribal from B.R. Hills.





From community participation to community responsibility and ownership

With Soligas trained as nurses and other paramedical workers, the hospital has a long tradition of employing trained Soligas as nurses/health workers. The hospital thus is a model of tribal empowerment itself. The hospital, like VGKK, has believed completely in transparency and a community-friendly attitude. A rights-based approach to health care has been encouraged, and the Soligas have a sense of responsibility and ownership over the hospital and hence their health status.

Community action for community health

By law, nobody may sell liquor within a radius of 10 km from a temple or a tribal settlement since 1989. Effectively, this makes the entire habitable area in B.R. Hills a no-liquor zone. But liquor licenses continued to be issued to vendors and the government continued to collect excise thereby regularising them. When tribal men started becoming dependent on alcohol, vendors set up shops in almost all the hamlets. As a result, domestic harmony was disrupted. Money was spent on liquor, while the children cried of hunger. The women rose in protest.



Seeking better lives: Soliga women get together

They approached the concerned officials requesting that the licences be cancelled. There was no response. They then turned to direct action. They blocked roads and halted buses on August 9, 2001 demanding that all licences issued in tribal areas and temple areas be cancelled. The police and government officials, including the tahsildar, were upset. They even threatened to take action against the protestors. The women refused to back down. They refused to leave the roads till their demands were fulfilled.

Finally, at 12.30 am on August 10, 2001, officials from the commissioners' office and the excise department came to B.R. Hills and promised the women that all licenses would be cancelled immediately and no new licenses would be given. Leaders of the 10 women's SHGs in B.R. Hills, community leaders, social workers and all those who cared about the lives of tribals rejoiced. The women quickly linked their own midnight tryst with officials with India's tryst with destiny! "India got freedom at midnight. We got freedom again at midnight after 52 years!" they said jubilantly. The women also decided to slap a fine of Rs 1,000 on people who drink and create a nuisance in the podus.





Round Two:

For a while, the area remained liquor free. In 2003, an enterprising man set up a liquor distribution centre in his house up the hill. While it was an open secret that he sold arrack to all and sundry, nobody - the police, the social workers, the local leaders - could catch him at it red-handed. When requested to stop selling liquor, the merchant, of course, denied that he did ever such a thing!

People who drank there believed it was legal and above board as the government of Karnataka had issued a license for the sale: "When the government has no problems, why do you?" they asked. They also claimed that the merchant showed them a paper to prove that he was a legal arrack vendor licensed by the government. What do you do in such a situation? First, the people approached the police. The police pleaded helplessness as they could not get a warrant to search his house without some evidence to start with. Drunkards who swore they got it at his house clammed up when sober!

The people then approached the commissioner in charge of issuing liquor licenses with a request to cancel the license. The response? We cannot cancel a license that we have not issued! No license had been issued for the sale of liquor in B.R. Hills. Yet, liquor was being sold and drunk in huge quantities. When the official channels proved useless, they turned to unofficial channels.

The women in the self-help groups, the Sangha members, and the social workers at VGKK set up an informal network seeking and passing on information about vehicles traveling up the hill. On January 24, 2004, they received news that the next consignment of liquor was on its way uphill in a jeep, the school children blocked the road and halted the jeep. Women from the SHGs quickly reinforced them along with social workers and community leaders. About 182 packets of arrack were found. The police were called in, and they responded immediately. Madhukar Shetty, the SP from Chamarajanagar came, but the women again refused to budge. They wanted the Commissioner of Excise to come and publicly put an end to the sham being perpetuated on the people in B.R. Hills.

The DC Chandrashekaraiiah came, and so did the press. The so-called license was torn up in public and the vendor was booked. Meanwhile, the police posted a regular patrol of the area to check for the sale and consumption of liquor. They also decided to meet the people every month to solve their problem.

As we go to press towards the end of 2005, no liquor is being sold to tribals in the hills, but desperate men have resorted to hiding a packet or two on their return from Yelandur - hidden among the vegetables and fruits or even tied up in their turbans. Sale of liquor to non-tribals continues clandestinely, but even these vendors refuse to sell any liquor to any tribal. They know they will be busted again if they do!





Education

Primary & Secondary

"Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man"

- Swami Vivekananda

A non-formal school was started in a small hut in the year 1981 with six children. The hut was a multi-use space which served as a clinic, residence for pupils and doctor, and storage space for medicines. The children played and worked hard all day and were taught to read, write and do some basic maths. Later, a new hut was built and the children moved to their new hostel. That was the beginning of the movement that has brought primary, middle, high, college and vocational diploma education to the Soliga tribals.



Tribal children could not only climb trees with ease but also name most of them!

Within a year, the night school was expanded into a day school with 20 children and two teachers. It was called Vivekananda Girijana Lower Primary School (VGLPS) and was inaugurated in June 1982. With funding from the Government of Karnataka, a proper building with a tiled roof was constructed. This room served as a dormitory for the children at night and as a classroom by day. There were black boards at both ends of the long room and a cloth screen separated the two classes.

This was the beginning of the formal school, but finding students remained a challenge. The mid-day meal was the main reason for attendance, and once the meal was done, the children found no reason to hang around the school. They went back to the forest. Most of the children were familiar with the names of over 250 trees and their medicinal and social uses. After a couple of years, the older children were academically ready to attend middle school and were sent to the government school in B.R. Hills. The younger children were taught in the VGKK school, where they learnt basic hygiene, good habits and received good nutrition in addition to the curriculum.

In the year 1986, the first batch of students were ready for high school and they were sent to study in Chamarajanagar. A hostel was set up with the support of Huche Gowda, a friend and philanthropist in Chamarajanagar. But the children were not very happy. They





Lunch is the high point of their day

were teased by the local students for being tribals. When the then chief minister Ramakrishna Hegde visited Chamarajanagar in 1986, the children requested him to start a high school in B.R. Hills itself. He not only sanctioned the school on the spot, but also admitted the school to the grants-in-aid scheme of the government of Karnataka. The first tribal school in the entire state, Vivekananda Girijana High School was inaugurated on 10th September 1986.

In the year 1988-89, the first batch of 23 students appeared for the SSLC examinations and five of them passed. M. Jade Gowda, the current president of VGKK, was among them. Three of the

children opted to study further and were sent to Chamarajanagar again. They were M. Jade Gowda, C. Made Gowda and S. Ramachandra. These three boys went on to study agriculture (Bangalore), social work (Mangalore) and botany (Mysore) respectively. At the moment, Jadeya is the only Soliga with a PhD degree, while the other two are among the handful of Soliga youth to have completed their post-graduation. Meanwhile, in B.R. Hills, the school continued to grow in strength. From the first six children, almost 440 children were enrolled by 1990, and by 2005, a pass percentage of 95% was achieved.

The forest school

All children dislike being cooped up indoors, forest children definitely did not like it and often escaped ingeniously. The most common mode of escape was to run away during the break after lunch. Some of the more intrepid boys jumped out of the window after responding to the attendance rolls. With unfailing regularity, some of them were caught singing and skipping along on the roads by Dr Sudarshan or Mr Somasundaram as they went back and forth meeting people. They were punished, but remained unrepentant.

In a strategy designed to reduce the number of runaways, the teachers went to distant podus and brought children who would stay in the residential facility. However, even some of those children ran back home. Bringing day scholars to school was a daily challenge for the small team of teachers-cum-social workers-cum-health workers who would leave the campus at 7.30 am and come back by 9.30 am with children. Sometimes, they had to carry them on their backs. Other times, a ride in the bullock cart brought the children to school. Some teachers found that music brought the children to school and like the Pied Piper of Hamelin would wend their way through the podus singing songs. These experiences laid the foundation for the alternative learning and teaching methodologies being used in the school to this day.

Many children would run away after the meal and could not be enticed back to school under any circumstances. When the teachers went to the podus to fetch them, the





C. Raju was one of the earliest students at VGLPS and VGHS. He was often punished for playing truant from school, preferring mother nature's lessons to the teacher's. He pioneered a new way to escape from the drudgery of studies by jumping out of the window after answering the roll call.

In the delicious irony that so often marks our lives, he was employed by VGKK after completing his studies and one of his jobs was to bring truant children back to school.

He was sometimes outwitted by children, much as he himself outwitted his teachers!



The pull of Somarasanakere on the children remains strong to this day.

children would climb up trees and throw down sticks and stones at the teachers. The parents would only smile and laugh indulgently at the antics of the children. Some enterprising teachers found that they could find the little runaways on fruiting trees and so they maintained records of the fruit trees in the vicinity. Lakes and water bodies were another major temptation for little children. To reduce incidence of such runaway children, it was decided to bring children from podus which were far away and keep them in a residential facility in the school itself.

It was only partially successful. C. Made Gowda, one of the earliest students, still has fond memories of short swimming sessions and long naps beside the watering hole after lunch. The punishment that awaited them that evening or the next morning was a small price to pay for such joys, he says even today. Such escapades continued even when the children were in their teens - in the 8th and 9th classes. As they grew up, they learnt to give more acceptable excuses like "I was not well", or "My stomach was paining". Their ingenuity was put to use in sleeping on the dormitory roof, eating during class hours at the dining hall, basking on the rocks around the campus, and even hiding inside the bushes. The pull of Somarasanakere and Neelavatikere on the forest children remains strong to this day, almost as strong as the pull of the ripening guava, mango, jamun fruits.

With each passing year, the number of students increased and they also got more used to the rigors of formal education. Some of the early runaway boys grew up to become social workers with the CCF, SAS and VGKK and themselves faced up to the challenge of bringing reluctant young boys to school! One of them recalls how a boy said he had to relieve himself and when the escort looked away, he ran away into the forest and reached home safely. The parents were not overly concerned. They just told him that he should have held the boy's arm all the way from his home in Seegebetta podu to school, a distance of over 2 km. He did just that the next day!

Puttaranga, a tribal from Hosa Podu in B.R.Hills nurtured a passion for zoology. Complementing his rich traditional knowledge with science, he can rattle off





The fact that every child needs an education often escaped unlettered parents. With the strong monetary incentive offered by the sponsorship programme, they were willing to send the children to school. But the work at home had to be done too... Who would take the sheep out to graze? Who would collect firewood? Who would cook and clean the house?

One parent came up with an innovative solution. Of the three children, one child stayed home by turn everyday while the other two went to class. That way, each child was eligible for sponsorship, and sheep were grazed as well!

It was the job of the administrators to explain why that was not an acceptable compromise!

scientific names and other details of the plants of B.R.Hills, sometimes surprising many a botanist.

Sponsorship programme

The Christian Children's Fund (CCF) started a sponsorship programme in this region in 1983. This scheme played a large role in the education of forest children in the early days. If the mid-day meal scheme was an incentive for the children to come to school, the sponsorship programme was an incentive to the parents to send their children to school. Somasundaram administered the programme with the help of local youth. Soliga youth who graduated from school were recruited to help administer the programme. They went to the podus with letters and gifts from the sponsors. They translated the letters and wrote down the replies. The replies were then sent to the CCF office in Bangalore and from there to the sponsor.

At its peak, almost 800 children were covered by the sponsorship programme. They attended Ashrama schools all over the region including Kannery Colony, Purani podu, Beduguli, Boodipadaga, K. Gudi, Kebbepahya, Murtipalya, Belatha, Shanivaramurti and other places. It was the job of the VGKK administrators and staff to coordinate the communication back and forth and ensure that every child received its sponsorship. One of the administrators recalls a donor who sent money with instructions that a white cow should be bought for the child she was sponsoring. In addition to the basic minimum amount, some donors sent additional amounts each month, while some sent it on special occasions.

This disparity in sponsorship led to misunderstandings and competitiveness among parents who all wanted to receive a lot of money from donors. The fact that the donors were themselves manual labourers or poorly paid hotel staff in their own countries was explained at meetings, but many remained unconvinced. They even accused the staff of taking away the gifts sent to their child. One parent even went to the extent of saying that since his child was not receiving money in school, she would not send the child to school.



Bringing firewood from the forest is





Like all other schemes, this too had its strengths and weaknesses. After 15 years, it was decided that the scheme had served its purpose - additional incentive to parents to send their children to school. The first batch of students has passed out of school and into the real world. Additionally, the Soligas were more aware of the exploitation they faced and they were empowered enough to decide that they should support their child's education for its own sake and not for the sake of receiving the sponsorship funds. The board of directors then decided to stop the programme and allow the SAS to motivate reluctant parents to send their children to school.

More than a school

The children in the hostel were self-sufficient. They cooked, cleaned and collected firewood. Additionally, they also cultivated vegetables, poultry, bees and silkworms. Pairs of children were allotted the duties by turn and they did it with

joy as it was preferred over sitting in a classroom and studying! Many of them also built lasting relationships with the teachers that last to this day. Shantala, Uma and Somasundaram are especially remembered fondly by old boys for their endless love and patience, while Dr Sudarshan inspired awe and reverence. The travails and joys shared in the early days are starkly etched in their memories. The last bowl of gruel, the fire, the elephant charge, the mosquitoes, the rainy wet days shivering by the fire, the stories told by night.

C. Made Gowda recalls: "Jadeya of Banglepodu and I were cooking that night. After eating, we threw the ashes behind the hut, near the chicken coop. Some of the embers were not fully cold yet and the straw around it caught fire. Sannarange Gowda woke up all of us and we ran out of the hut. Some of the chicken escaped, but some of them died." With this event, it was decided to construct a proper dormitory for the children. Funds were raised from friends and well-wishers and the teachers, children and the Soliga people, led by the board of directors, built the buildings themselves. Shramadaana was a way of life and each day people from one podu offered their labour for the construction of their school, hospital and dormitory. This minimised construction costs and brought a sense of



A student teaches lessons in hygiene in the podu

Some parents did not take care of the uniforms, all the students came to school and changed into their uniforms. They undressed and left the uniforms in school again.

Each child had a small iron box in which the uniform and pads were stored. The iron box incidentally, was made from a scrapped KSRTC bus, courtesy, M.R. Srinivasa Murthy.

Thursday was mashing day and it was the task of the teachers to ensure that the children mashed their uniforms. To this day, Thursdays are colourful days in VGKK as children come in coloured clothes.





The forest school: Open spaces make the children feel at home

Challenges	Strengths
First generation learners	Closeness to nature
Social background	Uncoloured mind
Economic problem	Good physique
Language	Forest knowledge
Inaccessible forest location	Honesty and simplicity
Cultural alienation threat	Peaceful temperament

parents did not really take care of cleanliness, the children would wash the uniforms and bathe in school every Thursday. The current generation of students are second-generation learners as the school has been operational for the past 25 years. Hence there is a positive change in the quality of care the children receive at home and this practice has been discontinued. However, parent-teacher meetings, SDMC meetings and SAS meetings are still used to reinforce this message whenever required.

ownership among the people.

Each primary school classroom had a set of iron trunks in which the students could store their uniforms and books. Children from the podus changed into their uniforms in school every morning. As their

School environment

In tune with the gurukula system of ancient India, the teachers live inside the VGKK campus with the children. This has given the teacher and the taught the advantage of personal contact. Loving care and guidance of the teacher is always available and there is greater bond of love and concern. Both the students and the teachers learn, share





common food and shelter. At times of sickness and ill-health, the teachers nurse the students and vice versa. Bonds built during these times last a lifetime.

VGHPS and VGHs are community-based, which means that the community is closely involved in the running of the school and in ensuring that the children are educated well. Teachers and parents closely monitor the school. Brain-storming sessions between the community of parents and teachers plan the development of the school, while children feed back into the community through their plays, street theatre, and awareness raising programmes. Education, therefore, is not done in isolation, but within the context of the students' lives.

In 1998-99, the board of directors and the school teachers brainstormed over the reasons for the continued mediocre performance of tribal children in Yelandur taluk with the support of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). Tribal children were unable to compete with children in the cities and big towns. A resource survey was conducted to check out the resources available. A resource map, seasonal map, drop-out map in terms of time and space, comparative time study of a dropout child and a school-going child were all carried out with the close involvement of the community. The availability of resources (food, electricity, educated parents, etc.) and how it impacted on the children were also mapped.

This helped the teachers to counsel parents and the community about how they could improve the nutrition of the children despite the crippling poverty of their circumstances. A chinnarangala was conducted in places where there were a large number of dropout children. The first generation of school children in each class were much older than children elsewhere, due to delayed entry into school. This made teaching them more challenging as they were already quite aware of their environment and were integrated as capable members of the forest society.

The teachers have planning sessions at the beginning of the academic year and follow-up during the mid-term holidays. Experienced educationists and teachers are



*Living in harmony with nature:
Wild boars roam around the campus every night*



*The open air nursery classroom makes
learning fun for tiny tots*





invited to guide the process. Teachers' workshops are held and teachers from other tribal schools are invited. Free exchange of thoughts, challenges, innovations and solutions is encouraged.



An environmental education class

Brain-storming session

In 1985, the 28 staff and teachers of VGKK took time off to discuss their challenges and innovate solutions. They chose the calm banks of the river Cauvery at Kabini in Heggada Devana Kote for this purpose. The challenges and strengths of teaching tribal children were summarised.

A study was conducted to see what type of education the children needed. In this backdrop, it was felt that teacher empowerment and school effectiveness would go hand in hand, each strengthening the other, and both together helping the children. Specific objectives were (1) to highlight the salient features of tribal education and the need to address the problem with sensitivity; (2) to appreciate the threat of cultural alienation that looms large on tribal society in the process of education; (3) to ensure tribal education is done within the framework of the economic constraints and human resources available; (4) to find out the positive factors in the system and use them; (5) to break the myth that education should be in total conformity with mainstream education with all its attendant evils.

The challenge was to devise new methods to help the Soliga child learn formal curriculum with a lot of freedom, joy, and creativity. These deliberations threw up seven special learning systems: experiential learning, environmental learning, Soliga culture and folklore, health education, physical education, vocational training; and moral and spiritual training. These were implemented in the school and made education more interesting for the children.

Making learning fun

Joyful learning makes learning interesting though creativity. The teacher does not use the textbook to teach. Stories, experiments, games and activities are used to teach children basic concepts in science, mathematics as well as history and geography. Group discussions, mock cabinets and mock elections not only taught the children civics but also developed leadership and responsibility. Use of games like naming game, soap-box discussions, Vibgyor, dragon game, knowing myself, and facing failures help children by teaching them not merely the lesson but also communication skills and life skills.

The school building is also designed to encourage



A Children's Day function chosen and conducted entirely by children





play in children and not restrict them in anyway. Students may often be seen playing hide-and-seek within the structure, between classrooms, pillars and across the central courtyard. The laboratory, museum and library buildings are placed outside the main school building to allow children a short walk in the fresh air. The classrooms are also constructed with large windows without bars, to make children feel they are outdoors. All the rooms are corner rooms with views of the trees, birds and surrounding hills.

Science play was a scheme of the Educator Manufacturer Association to make learning science a playful process. A science club was also initiated for high school students. This section has been merged into the science laboratory. Every year, a bus from the Vishweshwaraiah Museum visits the school, which is equipped to demonstrate various natural and scientific models. Students from Class 10 explain the models to students of other classes. In 1984, 22 community science centres were formed in Karnataka and one of them was in VGHS. A computer was donated to the school and the children learnt how to use it. Model rocket kits were given to the Soliga children to make rockets. The two telescopes in the school are used for star-gazing.

A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.

- Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

Environmental education : Balancing the local and the national

In collaboration with the Centre for Environmental Education (CEE)-South, Bangalore, the teachers prepared an environmental education syllabus for Classes 1 to 10 exclusively for the children of B.R. Hills. It includes information about the flora and fauna of the region and raises concerns specific to the region. The emphasis is on practical aspects rather than theoretical knowledge. Bird watching, tree surveys, wild life surveys, and survey of plants are included in the curriculum.

By virtue of their proximity to nature, the children have background knowledge about the forest and environment. While they may not know anything about pollution, the idea of conservation is already embedded in them. The teacher reinforces their existing knowledge and teaches topics the children are not familiar with. A scientific way of looking at nature is promoted. For example, they have all seen soil being dragged away by the torrential rains as part of their life with nature. The fact that soil erosion is a spill over effect of the degradation of nature is the teacher's contribution to the lesson. Competitions in leaf collection, tree climbing, mountaineering, and trekking are conducted, in which the children enthusiastically participate. A new environmental handbook for educators in BRT Wildlife Sanctuary titled *Forests Alive*, will be used from the next year.



Collaborative learning near the ponds





'Cultural education' is a process in which the children are encouraged to appreciate their own culture and intrinsic values and participate in it. This is necessitated in the circumstances where old traditions and values become merely rituals and face the threat of extinction in the new consumer culture. Many a time, the mainstream culture imposes itself on smaller cultures to the extent of throttling these. While it may be necessary to accept some relevant parts of the mainstream culture, the components of Soliga culture should not be washed away by them. Tribal children who are sensitive and open to modern civilisation are likely to regard their own pearls as trash due to the onslaught of external influences. To make the children realise that their culture is unique and is capable of giving direction and solace to mankind is the objective of this course.

Teaching Kannada language was a major problem for primary school teachers as the tribal language Soliganudi is spoken in homes. While the language has many words in common with present day Kannada, the isolation of several centuries had led to divergent developments of the two languages. The children found it difficult to learn. The learning was made easier by introducing Soliganudi language texts for lower classes. With the support of District Primary Education programme (DPEP), a textbook on 'Soliga Culture' in Kannada was published in 1997. This book was culture-specific, language-specific and context-specific.

This book was published for two levels - Std 1 and 2. It is an integrated textbook to teach children Language, Environmental Science and Mathematics. The book includes information on festivals, medicinal plants, songs, dances, local flora and fauna, seasons and other topics that find resonance in the daily lives of these children. In Std 1 and 2, the children are slowly taught more and more Kannada so that they are totally integrated into the state syllabus. This experiment was replicated in H.D. Kote with books in Jenukudi for the Jenu Kuruba children.

Applying modern techniques

'Experiential learning' is a self-learning technique. The student touches and feels every object, within the purview or outside the curriculum set for learning achievement. Science, geography and mathematics are the main subjects where the student has to experience directly from his interaction with the things in the

laboratory or the natural environment. While they learn the theory of biology in the classroom, they then work with in the soil, plant and grow trees, touch and see, learn about flowers and its parts. The primary school children enjoy it greatly. Since they are with nature, they get many opportunities to learn in the forest. It broadens their observation, enlivens their lives, and retain it longer in their memory.

With support from NIAS, innovative teaching-learning methods are being employed



Prayer at school every morning





SSLC RESULTS

Year	Appeared	Passed	break up			% of Pass	1st Class	2nd Class	Highest	Highest %	Topper
			ST	SC	Gen						
1989	23	5	4	0	1	22	0	0	283	47.17	Jade Gowda M
1990	20	8	6	1	1	40	2	2	377	62.83	Suresh Babu Y
1991	17	13	9	1	3	76	0	5	342	57.00	K. Bommaiah
1992	18	11	8	0	3	61	0	1	327	54.50	H.R. Nagaraju
1993	30	18	15	3	0	60	3	5	446	74.33	Srinivasa
1994	35	12	10	0	2	34	0	4	354	59.00	M. Srinivasa
1995	27	12	10	0	2	44	1	0	385	64.17	Kumara R
1996	40	10	4	3	3	25	3	2	-	66.28	Ranganama B
1997	30	11	7	3	1	37	0	1	-	52.32	Girdhara
1998	30	7	5	1	1	23	0	0	-	40.80	Ranganatha R
1999	18	10	4	0	6	56	3	3	-	73.12	Vinutha TC
2000	27	11	7	1	3	41	1	0	-	60.16	Bhagya N
2001	26	15	11	1	3	58	5	5	-	68.48	Keshava DP
2002	25	10	8	1	1	40	2	1	-	75.20	Gayathri V
2003	38	17	7		10	45	2	2	-	79.00	Sweetha S
2004	25	21	17	2	2	84	1	7	428	65.85	Sharda S
2005	40	38	25	9	4	95	11	10	460	73.60	Divya
2006	55	54	28	5	4	97.5	30	24	486	77.00	Mallesh Naik
TOTAL	524	283	185	31	50	54	64	72			

and child-centred activity is emphasised. Self-learning cards are displayed in the classroom. Word cards hanging down from the roof make learning interesting for the children. Every child is given individual attention. Montessori methods have been introduced for pre-school and early school learning. Every child finds learning an interesting game. The carpentry and crafts unit has made low-cost equipment for the children to touch, feel and learn.

'Collaborative learning' has helped to build team spirit as well as leadership qualities in the students. Personality development classes are conducted every week and every student is given a chance to participate in at least one co-curricular activity.

'Life-skills education' has been introduced in collaboration with NIMHANS, Bangalore, to help the children to face real life situations in the changing world. Life skills are living skills or abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour to enable individuals to deal with demands and challenges of everyday life. The following life skills have been adopted in our school: critical thinking, creative thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, interpersonal relationships, effective communication, coping with emotions, coping with stress, self-awareness and empathy. These techniques were used to make children understand the significance of simple things like: Why should I study? Why should I





become a leader? Why should I eat vegetables served in the hostel? Malnutrition has been reduced with the help of life-skills education and story-telling.

Inculcating social values

'Dynamic meditation' every Sunday morning has helped our students to increase their concentration and improve their memory. It has also reduced incidence of headaches and ill health. The students' confidence has increased and they have built a good rapport amongst themselves as it releases their pent-up feelings. Teachers also participate in the sessions, which brings them closer to the students. 'Personality development' classes to improve the quality in education is conducted, especially for class X. Memory retention techniques, short memory and long term memory, good study techniques, the techniques of getting high scores in public examinations with a little effort - all have yielded high results in the last three years.

'Value-based education' teaches children the importance of living a life based on values like empathy, sympathy, kindness, sharing, simplicity, high-thinking, living in harmony with nature and leadership. At a 12-day teachers' training workshop in Ramakrishna Ashrama in Mysore in October 1999, a value-based education curriculum was developed subsequently which was subsequently taught through stories, games, dramatics and leading by example. Practical lessons in responsibility, belongingness and ownership help children in their lives.

'Social work curriculum' is designed to encourage children to return to their community and work for the upliftment of their people after completing their education. The seeds of such work are sown in the school itself. Children go to the podus and help social workers in carrying out surveys, learn the problems of the people, and help them. Several of these children go on to join the Soliga Yuvaka Abhivruddhi Sangha (Soliga Youth Development Forum) and Soliga Abhivruddhi Sangha (SAS) with this early grounding in social work.

Computers in education

'Computer for education' started in 1986 with one basic computer donated to the community science centre. It was used to introduce children to computers and teach them games, basic typing, simple programming, etc. It has expanded to include multi-media devices to study their lessons and make learning more interesting. Now there is a full-fledged computer room with 10 computers. Children from class I onwards see educational CDs and learn how to use computers.

The GE Group of companies donated 10 computers and set up a computer lab complete with UPS, computer tables, speakers and wiring. The manager and several staff



Annual trips to places of historic importance are a highlight of the children's lives.





members took personal interest in ensuring that the work was well-done. They also sponsored a physically-challenged girl Parvathi and helped her study for a diploma in computers at J.S.S. College.

Impact of innovative techniques

With the implementation of this comprehensive programme, VGKK was able to reduce the dropout rate to the minimum. The current drop out rate is 3 percent which is below the state rate of 31.38% and the national rate of 52.8%. The establishment of VGKK school thus brought a new dimension to the lives of the forest children, who were learned in the ways of nature, but unlettered in the ways of men. With the new system of education, they will be equally comfortable in the forest and in the town. This school is considered one of the best in the district due to these innovations and committed teachers.

The impact is also seen in the results as 38 of the 40 students who appeared for Class X examinations in 2005 have passed. Of these, 11 have 1st class, 10 have second class and the highest percentage is 73.6% which is on par with children in cities, and far ahead of children in tribal areas who battle poverty and malnourishment on a daily basis. Children have also contributed to the construction of the buildings and hence feel a strong sense of responsibility, belongingness and ownership of the place. Problems faced in other schools - like damage to school property, vandalism, etc. - are minimised by this method.

To ensure the continuity of this innovation, teacher refresher workshops are conducted during the school vacations. Teacher resource persons of high reputation who have successfully experimented with their own methods in the tribal and disadvantaged schools are invited to share their thoughts and techniques with the students. Every Wednesday, a review meeting is held from 7 pm to 8.30 pm to discuss the performance of the school and hostel students. Additionally, special attention is given to every student.

Teacher-student meetings are held on the 25th of every month - to find out their problems and help them in every way.

This has been recognised by other organisations as Vasuki B.K. (English), S. Chakravarty (Primary school) and Arun Kumar (Hindi)

STATE-LEVEL SPORTS RESULTS FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

YEAR	STUDENT	EVENT	RESULT
1988-89	Vijaya	100 metres running, shotput	I
	Raghu	Javelin throw	I
	Jadamedathina	1500 metres running	I
	Uma	800 metres running	II
	Parvathi	1,000 metres running	II
1991-92	Satish	High jump	-
2001-02	Muckiahah	800 metres and 400 metres	-
2004-05	Rajanna, Nagaraja		
	Shivanudraswamy, Prakash	400 x 100 metres relay	-
	Rajanna	400 metres	I
	Rajanna	800 metres	II
	Rajanna	1,500 metres	III





STATE-LEVEL SPORTS REPRESENTATION BY PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Year	Student	Event
1995-98	Saamy	Shotput and discus throw
	Narayanan	Shotput and discus throw
1999-2000	Saamy	Shotput and discus throw
	Narayanan	Shotput and discus
2000-01	Rajana	Long jump
	Rajana	Shotput
2001-03	Rajana	Shotput
	Shivachandra, Nagaraja, Madava, Manikumar, Borana, Ramachandra	Kabaddi
2002-03	Shivanrao, Rangaraj Nalika, Ramachandra	4 x 100 relay
2003-04	Shivanrao, Madhu, Siddappa, Rudresh	4 x 100 relay
2004-05	Siddappa, Rudresh, Jaleya M., Ranganarany	4 x 100 relay
	Phaniappa	400 metres running

were honoured with the Best Teacher award at Taluk level awarded by the Department of Public Instruction and VGHS was awarded the Best School Award at the taluk level in 2003. Chintana Publications from Chitradurga organises Maths and Kannada Chintana competitions for children every year. VGHS students have received awards at every level. VGHS children have also participated in radio, and Edusat programs.

Co-curricular activities

Fridays between 12 noon and 1 pm is fun time for high school children at VGKK. They exhibit their innate talents in co-curricular activities like drawing, painting, elocution, quiz, recitation and contest for parliament through a civic election. We have divided the students into four groups named after rivers or tribal gods.

Primary and high school students go on an annual tour every year to a place of interest in Southern India. A picnic into the forests of B.R. Hills is also arranged, which doubles as an impromptu lesson in biology. Children's day is organised with competitions in local games like mountaineering, swimming, tree-climbing, tug-of-war, breaking the pot, rangoli, drawing and painting, singing and dancing. Cleaning rooms, lawns, poultry, gardening, animal husbandry and a kitchen garden are all maintained by the children teaching them valuable skills which will be useful in real life.

Additionally, every Thursday evening from 7.30 - 8.30 pm, hostel children express their talent and cultural knowledge through - stand-up comedy, story telling, dancing, singing, mime and drama. The student leader organises this event along with the students, and the teachers are part of the audience. The children also make statues for events such as Ganapati Puja.





Rajanna, our first national level player

Rajanna gets a place of honour as the first-ever tribal student from VGKK to compete at national level sports. In 2004, he won the 400 m race at the state level and stood second in the 800 m. With this, he was a member of the Karnataka state team that contested in running at the national level. At the national level, he stood 6th, though he did get his personal best of 50 seconds. He completed his SSLC at VGHS and is now studying I PUC at Kollegal. Hailing from a family of small farmers in H.D. Kote, he credits his principal Mr B.K. Sundaresh with supporting him both nutritionally and emotionally. His daily quota of eggs and milk came from the headmaster's house, while the spiked running shoes came from a donor. But the determination and endless labour that went into the training was entirely his. He ran up the hill every morning to build up his stamina and practised his sports whenever he could.



Rajanna, second from left, poses with his certificates and his team mates

Cultural /curricular competitions

VGKK organises an essay writing competition on Swami Vivekananda every year. In five taluks in Chamarajanagar district, about 500-600 children compete every year. About 10 centres have been identified where children come and write essays - all children get certificates of participation, while first, second and third prizes are given to the best three children at each level - school, taluk, district.

Students from VGLPS and VGHS also compete and win laurels at several cultural and co-curricular events like national integration songs, state, district and taluk level culture, arts and sports competitions. They regularly bring back laurels from all these events. Traditional dances of the Soligas are also presented by the children of VGKK at occasions like Rajyotsava Day to raise the awareness about tribals. Mysore Dasara is another occasion for the children to present their talents.

Academic record

Five students went on to complete their Bachelor's degree. They are M Jade Gowda, S. Ramachandra, C. Made Gowda, Rathnamma, Ravikumara. Of these five, M. Jade Gowda, C. Made Gowda, S. Ramachandra and Rathnamma went on to complete their Master's degree. Many of these people are now working with VGKK for the welfare of the Soliga community. Some of them are working as employees, while others are voluntary work-





ers. Satish, Jadeya, Ramachandra, Sanna Range Gowda, Narayana, Puttaranga, U. Ranga, Prabhakara, Jademade Gowda, Muthaiah, Huchiah, K. Range Gowda, Shivaram Gowda, Swamy, Sidde Gowda, Krishnaswamy, Kethe Gowda, Pande Gowda, C. Made Gowda, Mahadev Swamy, Bede Gowda, C. Nanje Gowda, S. Nanje Gowda, Vellappa, C. Raju, M. Jadeswamy, Mutha, Basavaraj, Bhagya, P. Nagamma, Shashi-kala, Kancha, Parvathi, Lakshmi, Lalitha and Rathnamma are some of them.

Sports achievements

Tribal children who live in the wild have good physical stamina and endurance. Therefore, VGHS students have always been very good at sports. As first generation learners, they were much older than their class cohorts and hence could not compete in taluk and state-level events. As soon as they were young enough to compete in these events, they did and many of them won the taluk, district and division level games to compete at the state-level events. They brought home medals and certificates from each level. Below are the achievements of our students at state-level events.

Education outreach activity: Reaching out

In 1993, another tribal school was started by VGKK in Punajur in Chamarajanagar taluk to cater to the population of children in that area. The school is sponsored by Bharat Petroleum Corporation and children come from Srinivasapura colony, Muneshwara colony, and Hosapodu. The school currently has 85 students studying in classes I to V. It is a day school without residential facility, but the children are given breakfast and lunch to take care of their nutritional requirements. Clothes, books and scholarships are given by VGKK through the funding offered by BPC. Currently, four teachers and one cook are employed there and are responsible for the educational, nutritional and moral education of the children. The mobile unit from VGKK visits the area every week to cater to the curative health needs of the children.

Ashrama Schools: Ashrama schools were set up in 1950s in Bandipur and K. Gudi to educate tribal children upto the primary level. With the success of these, such schools were set up in all tribal areas. Ashrama schools are small schools set up in the larger hamlets which have no formal school due to the low population and remote location. Typically, there is one teacher for every school who also doubles as the cook, cleaner, administrator and janitor. These schools are governed by the department of tribal welfare but the quality of teaching is open to question. Additionally, teacher absenteeism is high and motivation is low. There are several practical problems in this issue as it is difficult to get well-trained teachers to serve in such remote locations, for low salaries, and in such multiple roles. The Government offers many benefits to these schools like clothes, food, books, etc. However, these benefits only reach the students sporadically as corruption is rampant. Students have high rates of drop-out and absenteeism due to lack of teachers, facilities, irregular classes, etc.





Of the 19 schools in Chamarajanagar district, VGKK has recruited, trained and posted teachers to seven schools. Five students from VGHS who completed their pre-university course have been employed as teachers in these Ashrama schools. A plan to adopt all the schools in Chamarajanagar has also been presented to the government. In these schools, the teachers posted by VGKK will be closely supervised to improve the quality of teaching. Training, supervision and quality control of teachers, programmes to reduce drop-outs, increase nutritional well-being, and provide the benefits of civilisation to tribal children in remote locations is part of the plan.



M. Jade Gowda says that it was the love that the teachers lavished on him that made all the difference in his life. Shantala taught him maths with so much patience and love that it actually became easier to understand! Even if he fell asleep over his efforts, she would only cover him with a jute bag and let him sleep. Never did he hear a word of reproach or anger. The teachers believed in his capacities and trusted him. How could he let them down? His only quality, he says, was his endless curiosity about the world around him.

He learnt even more from visitors to VGKK than from his teachers. They brought with them a world so wondrous, that whenever a new face appeared on campus, Jadeya would latch on to that person so that he could soak in everything they embodied. He spoke English so often that he has been nicknamed English Jadeya in the community.

Each person on campus taught him something unique, he says. Dr Sudarshan was the spirit behind it all, the living example who set a hard road for the others to follow. Shantala taught maths, life-skills, concentration, spirituality and encouraged him in his efforts. Uma was the only teacher in the early days and she continued to offer career





guidance, tips on how to study, and always had an ear for his thoughts and travails. Chakravarty took so much joy in his successes and achievements, that it seemed all the more important to go further. Finally, H.N. Somasundaram taught him patience, English, courage and stories! All the other teachers shall remain nameless simply because there were so many of them. All these teachers have left a permanent impression on him and to this day, he believes VGKK has to focus on the education of children and youth in school and beyond.

His vision for the youth extends beyond the Soligas and embraces all tribal and marginalised youth. He sees the need for much more than merely education. Education does not end with merely book studies, it is a state of mind, a state of being. To be educated, to continue to be educated is therefore an event that is worth spending much time and energy on.





Education for Livelihood Vocational and Higher Education

"Therefore, stand up, be bold, be strong. Take the whole responsibility on your shoulders, and know that you are the creator of your own destiny"

• Swami Vivekananda

As the primary and secondary education needs of the Soligas were being fulfilled, it became clear that it was simply not enough. There were other needs to be fulfilled, other populations who had to be catered to. As students completed their schooling, the question of what they should do for a living loomed large. The forest would not suffice to meet the needs of the growing population and therefore, there was a need to create alternative employment, develop income-generating skills and crafts among the youth, and create self-reliant communities within the forests.



Rolling agarbathis

That was the reason for VGKK's entry into the world of vocational and tertiary education. Skills like tailoring, knitting, spinning, silk, cotton and jute weaving, mat-weaving, cane and bamboo works, baking, carpentry, smithy, agarbathi-making, bee-keeping and food processing were imparted to the youth. With this wide range of activities, it was possible to cover a larger cross-section of people, both literate and illiterate. A small-scale honey processing unit was started to provide employment to a few people and retain a larger share of the final sale price of honey within the forest.

In 1983, a Vocational Training Centre (VTC) was set up to equip the Soliga youth with income-generating skills and crafts. In 1994, a pre-university college was started in B.R. Hills when the children found it difficult to pursue education outside tribal areas. An Industrial Training Institute (ITI) was started to help girls and boys with high school education. Subsequently, three more ITIs in welding, motor rewinding and household appliances were started in 2000. A job-oriented forestry course was started in 2004 to better equip tribal youth to work in the forests. Finally, a drama school is now being started to equip Soliga youth to transform society. In the same year, a study centre for the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was started in Yelandur to bring relevant courses on rural development to the rural areas.





Vocational Training Centre

Almost 700 girls and boys have undergone various trainings at VTC so far. Only 24 of them are working at VTC now. The rest have gone back to their villages and podus where they have set up their own small home-based enterprises to support themselves. Loans have been made available to some youth to begin their micro-enterprises. Direct dependence of forests for livelihood has therefore been reduced. At the same time, there is an awareness that the forest has to be conserved to sustain access to raw materials for processing.

Trainings which are simple and based on local indigenous resources have been considered. Training was offered in about 20 different crafts. Some, which would be considered unsuitable, have succeeded, while others, presumably more suitable have not. The training inculcated in the youth a sense of discipline and pride in their abilities. This training

was also useful in organising the youth to create youth sanghas for the benefit of the communities. Entrepreneurship training was also offered to enable them to turn their craft into a livelihood. This has been complemented with loans, grants and equipment.

Short-term trainings were offered by the District Industrial Centre (DIC), Integrated Tribal Development Programme (ITDP), Karnataka Handloom Corporation (KHC), Regional Design Training Centre (RDTC), Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) and other organisations. Interested tribal youth have attended trainings in Bangalore and Mysore in their respective trade. H.N. Somasundaram, a member of the Board, took charge of the unit for 10 years. During this time several trainings were carried out and Soliga youth were motivated to work hard. The VTC also included a hostel for trainees to stay. They were called Somasundaram's boys and girls and took great pride in it. They worked hard to meet his high expectations and deserve the love and affection he lavished on them.

ACTIVITIES AT THE VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTRE

Agarbathi-making unit	1981-82
Carpentry	1982-83
Tailoring	1982-83
Bakery	1982-83
Bee keeping	1982-83
Mat weaving	1983-84
Handicrafts	1983-84
Weaving	1983-84
Honey processing	1983-84
Leaf cup making	1983-84
Candle making	1985-86
Cloth printing	1988-89
Knitting	1988-89
Herbal Soapnut powder	1988-89
MCR Footwear	1989-90
Lacquer dolls	1991-92
Welding and fitting	1991-92
Silk weaving on pedal loom	1992-93
Medicinal herbs collection	1992-93
Minor forest produce processing unit	1992-93
Notebook section	1992-93
Polyvstra weaving unit	1993-94
Food processing	1993-94
Hand-made paper unit	1994-95
Khadi spinning and weaving	1995-96
Masala unit	1995-96
Screen printing	1995-96
Fruit and vegetable processing	1995-96
Coir ropes and mats unit	1996-97
Sambar powder unit	1998-99
Natural dyes	1999-00





The following units are currently operational at the centre: tailoring, honey processing, food processing (pickles, juices and spice powders), soapnut powder, printing, notebook making, screen printing, handmade paper, bamboo craft, weaving, leaf cup making, candle production, coir and baking.

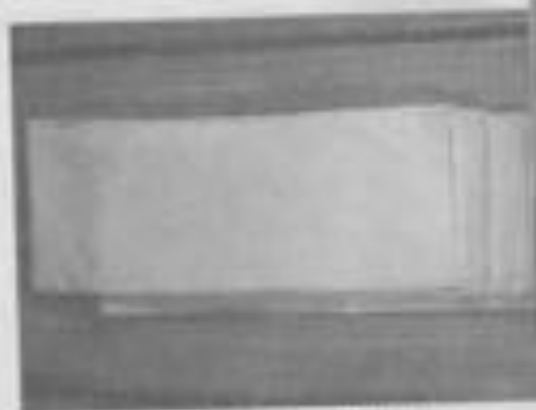
Other units like the agarbathi-making unit, leaf-cup making unit, vegetable dyes unit, MCR footwear unit, were closed down after a while due to a range of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. The trainees, however, continue to find the training useful and earn some income based on the training.

Tailoring: Vocational training in B.R. Hills started in 1982 with two tailoring machines and one experienced tailor, Shantala Hegde, who also doubled as school-teacher, surrogate mother, musician and general helper. In 1996, the tailoring institute was certified by the government and a two-year ITI diploma in tailoring was offered. At the same time, a NABARD-sponsored one-year course in tailoring was also offered to tribal students. After NABARD funding came to a close, VGKK continued to offer both kinds of courses to rural and tribal students at the Gumballi campus in Yelandur. As of 2005, a one-year government-certified ITI course in tailoring and a six-month school certified course in essential stitching are available.

When Shantala Hegde started teaching tailoring to tribal girls and boys, the students would break several needles a day as they learned to coordinate the functions of their hands and legs on the tailoring machines. But Shantala's endless patience, love and tutoring helped the youth overcome their problems. Tailoring and knitting machines were purchased with the support of concerned donors. The teacher's duties did not end at the tailoring institute, but extended all over the VGKK campus. She would also teach school children songs, bhajans, moral education, meditation and also mother them when they needed it.

Since 1996, the tailoring course at the ITI has been taught by Girija Devi. A total of 150 students have been admitted to the ITI, of whom 85 passed the government examination and are now certified tailors in women's, men's and children's clothes. They learn theory and the practical as well as social aspects of stitching. About 20 students have found jobs in garment factories in Bangalore and Mysore, while 30 are self-employed. The rest of the students are not using tailoring as a livelihood option.

From 1996 to 1999, NABARD supported a one-year tailoring training for tribal and rural students who were unqualified to join the ITI. The students were paid a monthly stipend and trained in stitching garments used locally. When the course first started, people from the rural areas around Yelandur were so keen that some even moved and lived in B.R. Hills just for the duration of the tailoring course. The school was shifted to the Uppinamole campus outside Yelandur as soon as the buildings funded by NABARD were constructed. Hostel and bus pass facilities were offered to tribal students in B.R. Hills.



Wearing, knitting and tailoring are taught to Soliga youth





As only practical tailoring is taught at this course, those who have not completed their schooling find it most suitable. Hence, VGKK continued to offer this course even after the NABARD project ended. In all, 116 students have attended this course. No stipend is offered to the students. Instead, a small fee of Rs 20 per month was charged. With effect from 2005, a standardised fee of Rs 50 per month is charged for both tailoring courses.

Honey processing unit: Honey is a staple Soliga food. Hence, bee-keeping was started on a small scale in bee boxes. The honey that was collected was processed using the equipment available - cloth, bottles, kitchen utensils, etc. This was upgraded with the support of KVIC when 60 bee-keepers were trained by experts and 750 bee boxes were given to families in B.R. Hills in Chamara Nagar. Collecting the queen bee to set up the bee colony, using the bee box and collecting honey were all taught to them. Field visits were conducted to bee centres in Belathangadi and Holenarsipura.

A honey processing unit was set up with specialised modern equipment. But just as the programme was about to take off, European Foul Brood hit the area and the bee colonies were disturbed. In 1993, Thai Sac Brood dealt a deathblow to all the bee colonies in Southern India. It was revived again in 1995, but the problems continued. Since then, bee keeping has not been pursued vigorously as the risk factor is high even in the case of small-scale and home-based enterprises. However, wild honey collected in the forests is purchased from LAMPS for processing. This is processed and marketed under the brand name 'Prakruthi'.

With support from TRIFED (under Ministry of Tribal Affairs), many of the experienced honey gatherers are now conducting 'Training of Trainers' to other Voluntary Organisations (VOs) in 2005-2006. The programme, consisting of a total of 35 workshops in 2 years, will reach 1,150 honey hunters.

Food processing: This section makes powders, pickles and juices from minor forest products. The Biligiri Soligara Kiruaranya Uthpanna Samikarana Sangha, a membership-

based cooperative, was set up with support from the Biodiversity Conservation Network (BCN). Under this project, the food processing unit was set up within the VTC to help add value to the forest produce. This is to ensure that employment is generated within the forest and a larger portion of the final sale price of the forest produce is retained within the forest.

Tamarind, soap nut (*Acacia concinna*), soap berry (*Sapindus laurifolia*), turmeric (*Cucumis cucuma*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), bitter lemon, jamun (*Syzigium cumini*), lemon, gooseberry (*Phyllanthus emblica*), magali (*Declopis hemultani*) and sogde (*Hemidamus indica*) roots are the major MFPs processed into powders, pastes, pickles and squashes. Gooseberry, a major product of B.R. Hills, is processed



*Honey processing unit at
B.R. Hills*





into several products - pickles, jam, morabba, juice and the salt-dried form. Some of these products are unique to this part of the world and are not available elsewhere. There are 860 members in this cooperative and they receive an annual dividend when the unit makes a profit. A part of the profits is ploughed back in the form of upgraded equipment and better infrastructure. Since most of these products are fresh, time constraints act as a major hurdle in the processing of these items.

Soapnut powder: This unit makes herbal shikakai powder, which contains three forest products - shikakai (soapnut), amla (gooseberry) and antwala (soap berry). By adding value to forest products and selling a finished product, the profits are retained within the forest. This product is known for its quality and is popular in the market.

Bakery: This has been one of the oldest enterprises in VTC. Some of the trainees trained in bakery have started small bakeries in their own hamlets. One Soliga family now operates the bakery in the campus to supply nutritious whole-wheat bread for the hostel children.

Carpentry, welding and fitting: These two sections were very useful for the growth of VGKK. Carpenters trained in this unit and trainees have together done most of the woodwork for the construction of buildings in the campus. They have also made the desks for the school. Similarly, the beds in the hospital, windows and other welding and fitting work were done by tribals trained in this unit. The welding section has been successfully converted into a full-fledged ITI and the same plan is now being implemented for the carpentry section also.

Mat weaving, weaving, handicrafts: Tribal youth were sent to Bangalore for training in these three crafts in the mid-1980s. They returned and produced goods for sale in the local community. Over the past two decades, the situation has changed drastically presenting a challenge to the maintenance of these crafts. Kora grass is not

available in B.R. Hills and hence mat-weaving had to be stopped. Mats are now woven only when required for the hostel and the campus. Cotton, polyvastra, cotton-silk and silk weaving were undertaken in the weaving unit, with technical and monetary support from various sources such as KVIC and KHDC. However, as is the case elsewhere in the country, this labour-heavy unit cannot match the low cost of mechanised factory.

Muttiah, a Soliga artist, in his cane and bamboo workshop



A tribal girl learns welding at the ITI





This unit supplies cloth used for school uniforms. Visitors also buy some quantity of cloth from our showrooms. Handicrafts are made and sold by individual craftsmen in their homes.

Notebooks and hand-made paper: One section makes Vidya notebooks for MSIL as well as Prakruti notebooks for use in the school and sale in the open market. Using waste from the notebook, tailoring and other units, this unit makes handmade paper which is then converted into files, bags and other utility items. This is eco-friendly as it uses waste and saves trees. The paper is used to make case-sheets, registration cards and other material for the hospital.

Medicinal plants collection and processing: With the support of KVIC and BCN, the small medicinal plant section went into full swing. All the medicinal plants in B.R. Hills were documented, they were then grown within a herbarium and finally converted into medicines like cough syrups, decoctions and powders.

Leaf cup making: This was one of the earliest units and used leaves easily available in the forest, in addition to arecanut and coconut which are conventionally used. However, with the advent of cheap plastic cups, the sale of these eco-friendly cups dropped. Our tribal youth are now experimenting with forest leaves like muthuga and geru leaves.

Coir making: With the support of NABARD, a coir mat making unit was started. Mats woven here are used all over VGKK and also sold in the showrooms. Tribal and rural girls have been trained in the craft of coir making.

Agarbathi-making unit: This was one of the earliest units in VGKK. In the beginning, only bamboo sticks were being cut and delivered to an agarbathi factory in Mysore. This offered a small income to very impoverished tribal families. Subsequently, training in agarbathi rolling was offered through a collaboration with KVIC. About 500 people were trained and basic equipment was given to them all. For the first few years, VGKK negotiated a buy-back tie-up with Vasu Agarbathi Company in Mysore. After this initial support, the women were allowed to sell their agarbathis in the open market. They now roll the sticks at home as a home-based enterprise and sell it in the open market, usually at village markets where they do brisk business on a small-scale.

Natural dyes: What could be a more logical vocation for the people of the forest? Using flowers, plants and barks, this unit was set up to create natural vegetable dyes. However, it was found that the quantity of natural resources required as inputs was very large as compared to the output. In tune with the minimally-invasive philosophy and relationship with the forest, it was decided to close this unit.

MCR Footwear: Leprosy was endemic to Yelandur taluk and the leprosy affected people needed special footwear made of micro-cellular rubber. This unit was set up to provide footwear to the people of Yelandur taluk who were being served by Karuna Trust, a sister foundation of VGKK. When the prevalence of leprosy in the taluk dropped dramatically from 21.4 % to 0.39%, VGKK was very happy to close this unit.



Saligi women in the weaving unit

Viveka
As the
educat
the pla
college
educat
in 2000
the bes
bus pas
Th
sociolo
in 200
incept
govern
S, a sur
(Rs 40
amou
the fee
Th
the stu
adults
Nagen
their A
comple
Future
availab

Year
1997
1998
1999
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006





Vivekananda Girijana Composite Junior College

As the number of children completing school increased, a clear need for a formal tertiary education sector manifested itself. Many of the children were intimidated by the ways of the plains people and preferred to live in or near the forest. Therefore, a pre-university college was started in 1995 in B.R. Hills to help children who found it difficult to pursue education outside tribal areas. The college was shifted to Uppinamole campus in Yelandur in 2000 to integrate tribal children in mainstream society and let rural children also avail of the benefits of this college. Tribal children were offered hostel facilities in B.R. Hills and a bus pass to commute to and from Yelandur every day.

The college currently offers four subjects in the Arts stream: history, economics, sociology and political science. There were only 12 students in 1995, 45 in 2000 and 119 in 2005. The college was supported by funds raised by the board of directors since inception. In 2004, it was decided to charge the development fee approved by the government. This is to make the college self-sustaining in the long run. For the year 2004-5, a sum of Rs 300 per year was collected from each student. This was increased to Rs 500 (Rs 400 for SC/ST) in the year 2005-6. This amount is still much much lower than the amount charged by other private colleges in the district. VGKK has also undertaken to pay the fees of Soliga children studying in the college.

The college has a National Service Scheme (NSS) unit to develop a sense of service in the students. Personality development courses are also conducted to prepare them for adulthood. Several students have gone on to do their post-graduation - Gayathri, Nagendra Swamy, Chandra, Somanna M., Surekha. Nagamma and Basamma have done their ANMs training and are community health workers. Vinutha, Aruva and Nanja have completed their special training in various technical health areas and are employed.

Future plans include a hostel for SC/ST students which is nearing completion and will be available from the end of 2005. The college will be expanded to include four subjects in

Results of the Vivekananda Girijana Composite Junior College

Year	Appeared	Passed	Pass percent	ST		SC		Others		Total	
				G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
1997	11	6	54.5%	-	4	-	1	-	1	-	6
1998	13	7	53.8%	3	3	-	-	-	1	3	4
1999	21	9	42.8%	1	5	-	2	-	1	1	8
2000	26	16	61.5%	1	4	-	1	-	10	1	15
2001	41	18	43.9%	2	3	1	4	2	6	5	13
2002	47	27	57.4%	5	6	1	3	2	10	8	19
2003	24	20	83.3%	1	8	2	2	2	5	5	15
2004	24	19	79.1%	1	2	2	2	4	8	7	12
2005	60	39	65%	9	4	3	8	6	9	18	21
2006	57	37	65%	1	2	5	3	6	20	12	25





the Science stream (Physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology) and a Bachelor's degree in Arts. There are also plans to start a National Cadet Corps (NCC) unit in the college. With this, VGKK will bring quality education at affordable rates to rural and tribal youth in and around Chamarajanagar district.

Technical education - Industrial Training Institute

On 21 January 2001, an Industrial Training Institute (ITI) was started to bring technical skills and employment to tribal children. This was supported by the Government of India to bring the marginalised people into the mainstream as skilled workers. The scheme is administered by the SC/ST Welfare Officer in Chamarajanagar district.

Three six-month courses in welding (gas and electrical), electrical motor rewinding and home appliances repair were offered and 10 Soliga youth were chosen for each training. Eight batches of students have passed out of this institute. They are paid a stipend of Rs 500 every month. Diploma holders in welding usually take up jobs after completion of the course at large factories and small and medium scale industries in and around Kollegal, Mysore and Nanjangud.

From 2005, each student will be given a tool kit after successfully completing the course. For the first time, girls expressed an interest in welding in 2005 and came forward to learn the trade. Five girls and five boys have recently completed their diploma course in welding. Following this, other girls have also expressed an interest in ITI training and will be trained in future. This course also makes the students eligible for a loan of over Rs 1 lakh.

VGKK plans to increase the number of courses available at the ITI from three to six, including three new courses in tailoring, carpentry and computer training (data entry) with effect from the next academic year.



Studying the forest

Job-oriented Course in Forestry

The tribal child's knowledge of the forest is astounding. This knowledge has to be ratified through a systematic and quantifiable process to make it an acceptable qualification for employment. In 1999, the board of directors decided to start a unique experiment in Karnataka with a two-year course in forestry for students who have completed 10 years of schooling. The Vivekananda Girijana College of Vocational Education was set up in B.R. Hills. Twenty students were admitted and trained in 1999-2000, however, it took 4 years to convince the state government

to recognize the course. Therefore, the course was suspended.

It was resumed in 2004 and 21 students were admitted. Of the 21 students, 20 students passed both the theory and the practical examinations in the first and second semester. They are now in their third semester. In 2005-2006, 20 fresh students were





admitted to the forestry course. All these admissions have been approved by the director of the Department of Vocational Education, Bangalore. With recognition, the course has started and there is a huge demand for admission in the course which is supported by IFA (India Friends Association) America.

This training of tribal youth in the science of forest conservation and sustainable utilisation of forest resource is in line with VGKK's basic objective of developing and educating tribal people. After completion of training, the students can take up conservation of forests as their profession. It will be an added qualification for entry into the government sector as a forest guard or the VO sector as a forest-based researcher.

The course includes theory and practical lessons divided into 4 semesters - each of 6 months duration. In addition to the introductory course, the students are also taught technical courses in silviculture, wood anatomy and utilisation, forest mensuration, forest botany and ecology, non-wood resources including honeybees, forest engineering and hydrology. Management-oriented courses include social forestry, agro-forestry, waste land development, watershed management, forest management and production, wildlife, birds and rangeland management, farm forestry, and forest policy and law.

Distance education with IGNOU

To enable rural people to access information about issues and concepts relevant to them, an Indira Gandhi National University study centre was started in Uppinarnole in Yelandur in 2004. Four certificate courses of six months duration each on HIV/AIDS and Family Education, Women's Empowerment and SHGs, Rural Development, and Food and Nutrition are offered in English and Kannada. These courses are especially useful to field workers and staff of local NGOs, who lack access to courses offered in universities in larger urban centres. This need-based course is being utilised by the staff of several NGOs across the district. In the very first year, a total of 50 people enrolled in the courses at the Yelandur centre.



Students of VGHS present their theatre skills

Vivekananda Girijana Drama School

To tap the inherent ability of the tribal children in folklore, dancing, culture, a school of drama called Vivekananda Girijana Drama School was started in 2000. Though Yelandur is one of Karnataka's smallest taluks, there are 18,000 people affected by health issues like epilepsy, mental illness, leprosy, polio, dental and general health problems. It is essential to raise awareness about prevention and cure of these problems. The drama school aims to be a major vehicle to raise awareness about the problems in society. Only 15-20 students may be admitted each year.





to the two-year diploma course in drama. With a mandate to present a mirror to social ills, they will also seek to present solutions and new approaches to these problems. The students will work with the people and seek to bring about a social transformation through the medium of street theatre and drama. The syllabus covers world theatre, Indian theatre, Kannada theatre, types of theatre, theatre direction, voice and movement, printing and technology, publicity, street play, Bharata's *Natyashastra* and practicals.

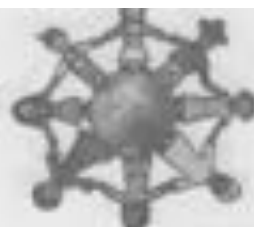
Sidde Gowda

Social worker, entrepreneur and supportive parent

'Doctor Swamy has made all this possible,' Sidde Gowda of Hosopodu says, even as his hands cover the VGKK school and dormitories in one sweep. 'My daughter wants to be a doctor,' he adds a little while later. His daughter received a prize for being the most regular student over a period of five years. Quite an achievement, especially considering the temptation that the forest, the raw fruits, the cool lakes and the gurgling brooks present!

Hailing from a small podu in the interiors of the forest, Sidde Gowda has only had seven years of schooling. But he understands the importance of education. It was this awareness that made him support Dr Sudarshan's efforts in the early days. Over campfires, youth leaders spread awareness about health, hygiene and human rights. Sidde Gowda left his job as a forest watchman, when the grocery shop set up by VGKK was handed over to him. To this day, he continues to run the shop stocking all items needed by the community.





Community Organisation

Empowering Tribal People

Duty is to encourage every one in his struggle to live up to his own highest ideal, and strive at the same time to make the ideal as near as possible to the Truth."

- Swami Vivekananda

The British laws had set in motion a vicious cycle of commercialisation of forests and forest produce, breaking the harmony between people and nature that was a hallmark of tribal lifestyle. What started as alienation from the forests led to loss of land, poverty, malnutrition, debts and finally ended in bonded labour. To break this vicious cycle, a well-planned and strengthened over several decades would be considered an impossible task, for governments. What follows is a case study of how it was made possible yielding a positive operandi that has been successfully replicated in all the taluks.



*The play on Panchayati Raj:
Soligas learn the benefits of democracy*

With the health and education services going smoothly and gaining momentum, other problems came to the forefront. It was clear that more had to be done to improve the lives of the Soligas. Merely education and health care were not sufficient. It was essential to give them a voice to demand, and if necessary, seize their rights from the hands of exploiters. Cheluvadi Made Gowda, the president of the VGKK board of directors, knew from experience that it was difficult for a single individual to make his voice heard while demanding justice from the government. He was also aware that as a leader if his voice counted for so little, other Soligas would have even more trouble. Having seen other tribal groups who had organised themselves, he knew that unity was strength. He wanted to bring the benefits of this unity to the Soligas as well. Thus was born the idea of community organisation among the Soligas. His words "Let us build Soligas" finds resonance to this day.

Panchayati Raj

In 1983, the Government of Karnataka passed the Panchayati Raj Act designed by the then Minister Sri Abdul Najir Saab, empowering people to elect their representatives to the local government. The local representatives would in turn respond to the needs of the community at the local level, taking care of sanitation, water, and some welfare activities.





Sheena Shetty, Krishna Moolya, K.P. Chandrashekar, Shivaraje Gowda, Kishore Attavar, Uma Shankar Periodi and other social workers were working with VGKK. The presence of these professionals fired the imagination of the budding community organisers at VGKK.

No Soliga had ever been a part of any local government institution. Social activists at VGKK felt it was high time they sent a Soliga to the Panchayat. In November 1984, Kishore and Uma Shankar held a street play camp to train the VGKK team in the techniques of street theatre. On 24 December 1985, 15 young men went to Boodipadaga, the furthest Soliga podu, to offer political science lessons through street theatre. Songs, dialogues and commentary were all in Soliganudi, the language of the land and the people.

How was such a venture funded? Without a rupee in their pockets! The lack of money was no constraint as the theatre troupe was enthusiastically fed at each podu with the hospitality that is typical of all Soligas. They simply walked from podu to podu as there were no roads or transport services in the forest anyway.

Scene 1: A government office. A tribal tries to enter the office, but the gatekeeper does not let him enter. A local political leader comes and he just walks in. The tribal learns that the man is a representative and so he has the right to demand services at a government office.

Scene 2: A village. Elections are being organised. There is a debate on the interconnections between politics and social development where the problems of divisive politics, of the pros and cons of elections are discussed. Leaders are elected.

Scene 3: A government office again. A tribal comes to the office. He is saluted and allowed to enter. Government officials listen to him and respect him as he is a representative of his people.

The impact of the theatre can be seen in two events. The 15-member theatre troupe that started walking from Boodipadaga on 24 December 1985 reached Seegebetta in B.R. Hills with 50 members after 7 days. In the first elections held in 1986, two tribal youth, Sidde Gowda and B. Jadeya Gowda were elected unopposed to the Yeragamballi Gram Panchayat - the very first tribals to be elected from Chamarajanagar, Kollegal and Yelandur taluks. Unfortunately, the election did not mean their voices were heard. Sidde Gowda was so disheartened that his gentle voice was not heard that he never contested again. Jadeya took the rough and tumble of politics a little better and went on to win the next election also unopposed, gaining the support of the non-tribal people as well.





the previous meeting are followed up on, and defaulters are held responsible. Sangha leaders take community members to government offices to follow-up on their benefits and rights. They also connect them to a network of lawyers, police officers, forest officers and other bureaucrats who are compassionate to the cause of the tribals.

The Sanghas at the podu-level meet at least once a month. The problems, deliberations, and decisions are then presented at the Taluk Sangha meeting. The different Taluk Sanghas then present their report at the Zilla Sangha meeting. This bottom-up model of development ensures that government benefits are equitably distributed among the needy. There is also a state level tribal committee to which issues that concern all tribal people in the state are presented. This is called the Joint Tribal Action Network.

One of the main activities of the Sangha is to ensure that the benefits given by the government reaches the most deserving people, among the tribals.

Main activities

One of the main activities of the Sangha is to ensure that the benefits given by the government reaches the most deserving people, even among the tribals themselves. For this purpose, the grassroots based Sangha is very effective. Sangha office-bearers are aware of the details of each household in the podu. Who has no house? Whose house needs repairs? Who needs food grains? Who needs relief funds in the event of floods? Who needs seeds for sowing? Local podu leaders collect these details and forward it to the Taluk Sangha office, which in turn follows up the matter at the appropriate levels of the government.

To ensure that the money and products given by the government are used optimally, the Sangha has worked to reduce people's dependence on middlemen and contractors. Earlier, a contractor would take Rs 40,000 from the government and build a house for Rs 20-30,000 pocketing the rest. The house would fall down in due course, injuring or even killing the inhabitants. Now, the people collect the money themselves from the government and build their own houses.

The Sangha encourages people to build their house themselves. The beneficiaries contribute their labour as well as source many materials locally. Some Soligas in the podus have undergone training in technical aspects of house construction - masonry, roofing, etc. Wages are paid by beneficiaries who can afford to do so. In the case of friends or very poor people, the masons work on a reciprocal basis. In this way, the Sangha ensures that government benefits are put to good use and are not frittered away. The Sangha also ensures that landless and indebted families receive government benefits like tree patta, land grants, fruit orchards, and monetary relief from the government.

Soligas offering Skramadaan





Anyone who proposes to do good must not expect people to roll stones out of his way, but must accept his lot calmly, even if they roll a few stones upon it.

- Albert Schweitzer

Despite 25 years of continuous struggle, the Soligas still have to continue to fight to assert their rights. In 2005, two such campaigns were carried out. One related to the struggle for land rights in Kullur, the other opposed the ban on Minor Forest Products (MFP). Through a concerted campaign of awareness raising and social action targeted at the general population as well as policy makers and decision makers, the SAS attempts to change existing policies to create more favourable conditions for the survival of the Soligas. This shows that despite two decades of development and change, some things remain the same. There is a long way to go in ensuring that the vision of VGKK is realised.

In addition to organising tribals at the local level, VGKK has also been involved in state-level organisations such as the State Indigenous Tribal People's Forum.

State Indigenous Tribal People's Forum (Karnataka Rajya Mulanivasi Vedike)

A three-day youth conference 'State Indigenous Tribal Youth Conference' was organised on October 12, 2000 (International Indigenous People's Day) to train about 480 indigenous youth aged between 18-35 years (25 percent of them women) in social work. A State Indigenous Tribal People's Forum was then formed, with active district branches called Zilla Budukattu Girijana Abhivruddhi Sangha (District Indigenous Tribal Development People's Organisation). The activities of the Forum involving tribal youth in community development, education, health care, bio-diversity conservation, awareness raising on issues relating to exploitation, sanitation, hygiene, and general health. The Forum also makes people aware of government policies, facilities and benefits and conducts campaigns to reject drugs, alcohol, and other social evils.

Aware of the need to make an impact at the local level, the Forum is coordinating district level youth organisations to do the above mentioned activities. They are also coordinating with people's organisations at the taluk level to deal with local issues like land grabbing, mining, encroachment, corruption and exploitation. The Anti-liquor campaign in Kollegal in 2004, anti-plastics (January 2004) and anti-liquor campaign (August 10, 2001) in B.R. Hills, the literacy campaign in Yelandur (2002), polio eradication campaigns (2005), preserving Soliga tribal culture and in state-level agitations to demand an end to the ban on MFPs, and against attacks on tribal people and tribal culture (2005) are some of



*State-level tribal organisations
support each other in the state*





VGKK in collaboration with the Vivekananda Foundation brought together tribal youth from all over the country for a Vivekananda Yuvajana Shibira from January 7-10, 2005. The young people came to reestablish their identity as tribals, as youth, and as Indians.

Tribal Joint Action Network

Tribal groups and VOs from different districts have come together to form the Tribal Joint Action Network. VGKK, DEED, CORD, Dudi, Vivekananda Youth Movement are some of the founder organisations. H.N. Somasundaram played a major role on behalf of VGKK. They hold quarterly meetings thrice each year which is hosted in turns by each organisation. The meetings take stock of the achievements of each organisation and how they have been achieved.

This helps other organisations to learn good practices and replicate the same in their own communities. Exploitation of tribals is also discussed and they help each other by discussing and taking decisions about how to deal with problems, issues, etc. By joining hands with one another across borders and tribal identities, they have managed to make their voices heard by the policy makers and authorities. They follow-up cases with

relevant authorities, support victims, and present a united front in the struggle for justice.

In the Tamarind Tree case chronicled earlier in this chapter, Roy David of CORD, Dr Pais and Shrikant of DEED, Nanjundaiah of Fedina, Vikasa of H.D. Kote, Setumadhav, a freelance activist, and many other concerned people came to Chamarajanagar to offer support to the tribals who were demanding their trees back.

Similarly, in the case of a Jenu Kuruba woman who was raped by a forest department official in Hunsur, VGKK joined other organisations in protesting against the atrocity. The forest

official was punished and the woman was compensated monetarily. The fact that the entire tribal community rose up in her defence was doubtless a major psychological and emotional support to her. Medical care was also provided by the organisation. This ensured the all round support of the victim and not just the punishment of the offender.



*Joining hands with one another across borders
and tribal identities*





Vivekananda seva prashasthi

Since 2001, VGKK has instituted an award to honour tribal women and men who have worked for the upliftment of tribals. On Swami Vivekananda's Birthday, committed social workers are honoured and given a sum of Rs 5,000 to help them further in their work. Here are the awardees over the past 5 years.

2001	J. Bommaiah, Banglepod, B.R. Hills As the head of VGKK, LAMPS Society, taluk panchayat member, and Tribal Joint Action member, he has been closely involved with the organisation of Adivasis to demand their rights.	Jaji. Hunsur, Mysore district As a member of the Mysore ZP, she has been responsible for organising Jenu Kurubas and helping them avail of the benefits from the government. She has created many Mahila Sanghas.
2002	V. Muthalaiah, Ganigamangala, Kollegal He has been active as a social worker in community organisation for the past 15 years, helping to establish SAS in all taluks, he is a member of the State Adivasi Indigenous People's Forum.	Kamalamma, Kodagu district She has organised Kodavas to protest against liquor and the exploitation of women. She tries to bring government benefits to the most deserving people.
2003	Cheluvadi Made Gowda, Yerkanagadda, B.R. Hills A hereditary tribal leader, he was the first president of VGKK, and played a very important role in organising Soligas.	Mari, H.D. Kote, Mysore district She has started literacy campaigns, and raised awareness about the education of girls. She has also worked hard to organise and raise awareness among Adivasis.
2004	M. Jade Gowda, Hosapodu, B.R. Hills, Chamarajanagar district The first Soliga to pursue higher studies, he has tried to motivate other youth to pursue higher education. Culture, education and social work are his special interests. His specialisation is in tribal agricultural methods and alternative livelihood strategies.	Malige, Thethimathi, Kodagu district She has been working in the field of health care and women's empowerment where she started many programs. Literacy, girls education, community organisation of adivasis have been some of the areas she has been active. She has been elected to the GP, TP, and ZP for the past 20 years.
2005	D. Mahadeva, Jallipalya, Kollegal, Chamarajanagar district He is a social worker involved in community organisation in Nanjangud taluk. He carries out various activities for adivasi development.	Rathnamma, Kantaniwadi, H.D. Kote taluk, Mysore district She is a Jenu Kuruba woman who takes special interest in ensuring that children go to school. She has started night schools in each village to ensure that drop out children are literate.





Injustice Compounded



The land under dispute: Is this a forest or not; this once a cultivated land?

Mahadevamma lives in Atgulipura Girijana Colony with about 35 other Soliga families. Every morning she wakes up to a future of uncertainty. As the crow flies, she lives a mere 4-5 km from her land, but they have to take the road which is about 8 km in length, and costs Rs 5 by bus, all for a piece of land that they do not have titles to.

In the late 1980s, tribals all over Karnataka were herded out of the forests by forest officials interested in maintaining the 'integrity' of the forests. Some of them were lucky enough to be given houses and land on the outskirts of the forests. The

Soligas currently living in Atgulipura Girijana Colony are one such lucky lot. They were promised and given houses and fruit orchards in March 1987. To this day, many of them remember to bless the then DCF Anu Reddy for his scrupulous honesty in keeping his promises. But this is where their luck ran out. The rest of the story reads like a requiem to their future.

First, the land given was at a distance from the houses built for them. Second, the fruit orchards were granted by the forest officer on a plain piece of paper listing the names of all the 35 heads of households. There is no date or letterhead. Third, after 6-7 years, there was a drought when not a single fruit or grain of ragi grew. Fourth, when tribals went into the forest to collect NTFPs to supplement their diet as a result of the drought, Veerappan killed 15 of them from the area. Finally, Purushottan, a Range Forest range Officer told them that they must stay away from their orchards until Veerappan was caught or killed. Fearing for their lives at the hands of the poacher and his enemies, they stayed away from their orchards, working as daily wage workers (coolies) in other farms. To this day, the wages paid are very low and discriminatory. A man is paid Rs 60 per day, while a woman is paid Rs 30 per day. People who hailed originally from Beduguli, Monakal, Karadidasanapodu and other such places in the interiors of the forests, and lived with dignity and in harmony with nature, were now converted into coolies, whose future remains clouded in uncertainty.

While the rest of India has marched into the 21st century with much fanfare, "we still live in the dark ages," says Made Gowda, who has a house but no electricity, no land rights, and no future to speak of. After Veerappan died in October 2004, D. Mahadevamma, Made Gowda, Chikkarange Gowda and others prepared themselves to cultivate their



Injustice Compounded



land again. The fruit trees had all died in the absence of care.

As the 2005 monsoons started, they made their way to the land and built make-do shelters and started turning the soil. Soon, the forest department officials also made their way there, with trees for an afforestation programme. And thus began the inevitable clash between the people of the forests, and the people charged with keeping the forests safe. The tribals refused to move, the officials refused to let them stay. The face-off continued for a while. On the morning of July 22, 2005, Jade Gowda who had gone to fetch water from the stream was beaten by the forest officials. The women protested against this behaviour. Finally, around 1 pm on July 22, 2005, the tribals were arrested by the police and taken away from their land. Most of those arrested were women and children. Only one man and a youth of 18 were at the land at that time. They were also arrested. The men had gone to work as coolies to feed their families.

Mahadevamma was not among those who were arrested that day. She was attending a family function in Chamarajanagar that day. When she returned home, the colony was enveloped in a deathly silence. Then news of the arrest reached her. She contacted the women's self-help groups in the region, and other organised groups. People from Yethegowdanadoddi, Hospodu, Muneshwara Colony, Boodipadaga, Goremadu, Banawadi, Argulipura, and Kullur rushed to Kullur to support them.

Mahadevamma herself was more interested in getting to those who were arrested. Both the forest department and the police disowned any responsibility about the tribals. Fearing the worst, Mahadevamma cajoled, begged and finally threatened the police officers. They were finally found directed to a nursery where the arrested people were being held. There they found worried officials and angry women.

The Soliga women were refusing food, water or even tea and snacks. "Our husbands and children will be worried about us and they will not eat. Why should we?" Madamma asked the forest officer who implored them to eat. When the children cried of hunger, they still did not relent. They put the crying children to sleep, but did not feed them. "It is much better to die, than to live like this, without land or work," said Jademadi, a 30-year-old Soliga woman whose two children were with her that day.

Finally, about 10 hours after the arrest, a compromise was reached. The forest



The temporary huts that housed the Soligas during the face-off with the Forest Department





included 71 podus spread over a distance of 80 km, in the Mahadeshwara Hills range belt. Eighty percent of the Soligas were bonded labourers. To this day, old-timers in Kollegal recall the two social workers fondly as "Krishna and Balarama" who came and helped them. After the Soligas in the three taluks had organised themselves, they decided to include the tribals in Nanjangud taluk as well.

In 1994-95, it was decided to start community organisation among the Soligas in Nanjangud. One social worker from VGKK was posted there. He travelled to all the tribal colonies in the taluk - Kothanahalli, Naganapura, Dornakatte, Venkatagiri, Kalanamuru and Chalakahalli. People from three different tribes live there - Soligas, Jenu Kurubas and Betta Kurubas. The work of organising them to make them self-reliant has been going on successfully. Local Sanghas were started and government facilities and benefits which were not being used earlier are now being used by the people. In Nanjangud, the people fought against bonded labour, police and forest department harassment.



*A jatha presents a street play
on Panchayathi Raj*

Modus operandi of the SAS

After a successful experiment in Kollegal in the mid-1980s, it was decided to implement the "three P" strategy - Petition, Press, and Picketing. In the first phase, a problem is brought to the attention of the relevant local authorities through the formal submission of a petition. If this does not bring the desired result, another petition is sent, this time to a higher authority with a copy to the local authority. This usually works and if it does not, then the process is repeated at the ministerial level. In the case of issues that have a national impact, the Prime Minister and the President are also approached.

If this does not work, then the social workers contact the local press with a detailed press release that documents the problem, the facts, and the lack of response from government officials. These press clippings are then collected and sent to the respective minister at which point the government is generally motivated to respond quickly. When all these efforts fail, as in the case of the campaign against the ban on non-timber forest produce, or the ban on liquor sales in tribal areas, the Sanghas resort to the streets.

It takes a tremendous amount of preparation to organise a satyagraha or a march on the streets. The Sangha leaders build awareness and motivate the people in advance to ensure that moral, physical and logistical factors are in place. They then seek the support of the police officials in the place where they plan to congregate. Group discussions, speeches, dance, drama and song are all used to convey the message. If there is no response in a day or two, they gherao the concerned officials and demand a solution on the spot. The women take a leading role in these activities. They are empowered not





merely in the economic sense, but also socially.

In the early days, the problems involved land, tree pattas, bank loans and fruit orchards on a small scale. Twenty years later, the problems remain. Ban on NTFPs, sale of alcohol in the podus, large-scale displacement of tribals from their land in Kullur and the abuse of tribal boys in the media are some of the recent issues.

Responsibilities and activities of SAS

The major responsibilities of the SAS may be divided into two categories: external action and internal transformation. *Jana sabhe* (people's meeting), *samparka sabhe* (contact meetings), *marcha* (march), *satyagraha* (protest), and *gherao* (surround) are some of the strategies used by the Sangha to make the voices of the Soliga people heard outside. The SAS also learnt how to use the press effectively in their campaigns to gather popular support and ensure that their efforts are successful. To bring about a transformation within the community, the SAS used the *jatha* (street theatre), which continues to be effective to this day.

In a *jatha*, people walked from village to village covering all the podus in the taluk. Meetings are organised in every village they reach, and the issues and concerns are discussed. This then becomes a rallying point for all the villagers, as they are all sensitised about the issue in one campaign. Amateur theatre troupes of Soliga children and youth have travelled from podu to podu to raise awareness within the community. The range of themes covered is exhaustive - exploitation of tribals, panchayati raj, illiteracy, cleanliness, hygiene, dehydration, good health, and even nutrition. Instead of organizing vast lunches and dinners to feed the troupe, the normal Soliga custom is that each family hosts one troupe member who shares the food of the family.

The *jana samparka sabhe* has brought about a phenomenal change in tribal life. For this contact meeting, it is the officials who come to the village and not the other way round. For most officials, this was the first time they had been to a tribal hamlet and interacted closely with tribal people. The officials who have been invited often come with gifts of tree pattas, land pattas, seeds, houses, or cash compensation. The people invited to these meetings range from ministers, MLAs and high-level bureaucrats to local government officials, journalists and other VOs.

Social workers who were responsible for the establishment of the SAS also phased themselves out and trained local Soliga youth as social workers in each podu and taluk. This was done quickly to ensure that dependence on external agents did not become a part of the organizational culture. This tradition continues with each set of office bearers handing over charge to the next generation and phasing themselves out as soon as



The women take a leading role in protest marches





possible. They stay on as advisors, mobilisers and encourage the youngsters to work in the field. In this way, in a short span of 25 years, a large number of youth feel empowered and can walk confidently into the police station or any other government office and demand their rights.

C. Raju, a social worker in Chamarajanagar, recalled his first experience in a police station. He was there to seek information on a case being filed against some Soliga people. When he reached the station, the policemen were beating someone there. He was so scared that he almost ran out. But somehow, he followed his seniors' example and stayed put. He saw at first hand how the issue was cleared successfully and the case was closed. Today, he is the senior who must stay in the room to give courage to younger Soligas who want to run. From him, they gain courage to stand face-to-face with the officials and demand their rights.

First memories

The first few activities took place concurrently in various locations - tamarind tree campaign in Boodipadaga and land campaign in Yedhegowdanadoddi in Chamarajanagar and freeing bonded labourers in various parts of Kollegal. These events reverberated all over the dispersed Soliga people, who despite the distance were now more closely knit.

People Power

In 1984, Satyanarayana Hegde, a young graduate who was working with VGKK was sent to Boodipadaga, a podu of about 300 people, for the implementation of a project of the Ramakrishna Mission in Mysore. In the process of planting coconut saplings and other trees, Hegde discovered a shocking fact. The 89 tamarind trees on the land belonged to the Soliga families, but the crop belonged to a politically and financially astute person from Chamarajanagar. They had signed away their yield for several years in return for Rs 100 or 200 each. The tamarind from each tree was worth at least Rs 4,000. When he reported this at the weekly meeting, the entire team including the board of directors was shocked.

He was asked to organise them to



Soligas waiting outside the DC's office in Chamarajanagar

oppose the exploitation. Umashankar and Shivaraje Gowda, social workers at Hegde took on this challenging task with regular support and encouragement from the team in B.R. Hills, including both the board of directors. It took them over a year to simply enlighten the Soligas





with each other (see box below: *People Power*).

Flushed with the success in Boodipadaga, the Soligas of Yethegowdanadoddi also decided to press for their land rights. A landlord with good financial and political capital had taken over their land and it had even been regularised through corrupt means. When their crop was ready for harvest, the landlord, with police protection, came and harvested it. Their entire labour was in vain. The Soligas demanded their land back and 12 people were arrested. Sangha members took the news to the VGKK headquarters in B.R. Hills and Dr Sudarshan, who had adopted the Soligas as his own people, went to the police station demanding their release. He was also arrested. It was December 6, 1986.

Despite the suggestions of friends and lawyers, Dr Sudarshan refused to apply for bail and went on fast and was moved to Mysore. The Deputy Commissioner of Mysore district heard of this and came to meet Dr Sudarshan immediately. He tried to convince him to take care of his health and accept some food. However, Dr Sudarshan remained adamant. The news spread like wildfire and the very next day, about 1,500 Soligas from Hunsur, Kushalnagar, Chamarajanagar, Yelandur, Kollegal, H.D. Kote and other areas spontaneously gathered in front of the jail at Chamarajanagar to protest against the arrest. The press covered this event profusely.

Soon the land issue was settled in favour of the Soligas and all the Soligas arrested

that they were being exploited. Finally, when the people in the podu agreed that they had been exploited, they were still unwilling to fight back. "Let it go now, we will not give the trees away in future," they said! The fact that the documents alienated them from their trees for the next 8-10 years did not seem to matter.

Cultural, social and political factors complicated this issue further. Avoiding conflicts of any kind is an integral part of the Soliga culture. There is also a deep-seated fear of outsiders. Whispers and rumours of the large political clout and muscle power wielded by the man in Chamarajanagar were added to this mix.

Worried Soliga elders counselled Hegde not to go to Chamarajanagar. They were afraid that he would be attacked for inciting the Soligas against exploitation. The man who owned the

crop employed guards from the neighbouring non-tribal village, thus adding the caste factor into this already volatile mixture. It was the task of the VGKK social workers to explain the exploitation process to the guards and request them to support the tribals and not the exploiter. This took awhile, but it was successful. This gave the Soliga people some strength and they decided to march to Chamarajanagar on 8th January 1986 to demand their rights to trees back.

Somehow, almost 3,000 Soligas made it to Chamarajanagar that day, including children, women and men. With them were all the staff and board members of VGKK including Cheluvadi Made Gowda, Dr Sudarshan and Mr Somasundaram. At the end of two days, their peaceful but forceful demands were met and the mission was successful.





were released within 48 hours. After this incident, Dr Sudarshan was held in high esteem not only by the Soligas, but also by the mainstream public.

With these two successes behind them and support from the local press, the task of freeing bonded labourers gained momentum. As an ex-bonded labourer put it:

"Independence came to India in 1947, but it only reached us in 1985." The landlords and the bonded labourers themselves resented the activists and social workers. Using the services and support of a few friendly government officials, the SAS tapped into the Government of India schemes for the rescue and support of bonded labourers. They were given a small sum of money to help them live their life independently.

In some cases, the landlords had strong political and religious connections. Social workers were threatened and even beaten in some places. But they persisted and continued to work until all the Soligas were released from bondage. Then, the SAS went on to tackle other



Soligas spontaneously gathered to protest against the arrest of Dr. Sudarshan

issues like granite quarrying in B.R. Hills, land issues in Muneshwara colony and Purani, employment of non-tribals by the forest department, low wages, corruption, sale of alcohol in tribal areas and so on. They evolved a modus operandi called 'social action' to deal with such issues which serve as rallying points for the entire community. Women have been at the forefront of these struggles and the government has been listening to the voices of the community. A case study of the struggle to stop quarrying in B.R. Hills was chronicled by Kamal Gopinath in *The Indian Express*.

SAS structure

All Soliga youth and adults are Sangha members. They choose office bearers from amongst themselves, and the team usually comprises both women and men. The people usually choose a president, a vice-president, secretary, treasurer and members based on their proven record of social work and social consciousness. Nobody is allowed to continue as president or vice-president for a long period of time. This is to ensure that everyone in the community gets a chance to be a leader. The process of leadership building is thus very broad based and takes the entire community into consideration. As the process of leadership is also very empowering, this helps a large section of the population to find their voice.

The Sangha works to ensure that people's problems within the podus are solved. They hold weekly meetings where grievances are aired, solutions discussed and responsibilities are demarcated. At the next meeting, the responsibilities demarcated at





Stones enclose blades of green

By Karnal Gopinath, 19th Jan. 1994, Indian Express.

One of the biggest dangers facing the pristine evergreen and dry deciduous forests of Karnataka are the bulldozers and dynamite of the powerful black and brown granite quarry operators.

These operators have made the lives of the forest tribes like Soligas, nomadic in many localities in and around these forests, and those fighting against this rape of nature and exploitation of the indigenous people, impossible. The administration and its various wings remain mere spectators. Mysore district has a rich concentration of natural forest wealth, housing as it does the Nagarhole wild life sanctuary, the Bandipur tiger reserve and the Biligiriranga hills wildlife sanctuary. But the evergreen hills of the eastern ghats have been targeted for the attack by the granite miners as this stretch of natural forests yield the valuable black granite.

The operators first cast their eyes on Male Mahadevsvara Hills forest region, the heart of notorious forest biggame, Vengalappa, who is still eluding the Karnataka and Tamil Nadu special task forces and the Border Security Force (BSF). However, it was the elusive forest bandit who came to the notice of environmentalists and others who wanted to send the quarry operators packing.

With it becoming increasingly clear to the authorities that quarry operators were siding Vengalappa's survival, the government stopped all quarry operations in the Male Mahadevsvara hills, early this year. These operators then turned their attention towards the hills in and around the 550 sq. km Biligiriranga Sanctuary. The struggle of the Soligas and the reputed Shankarappa Gopanna Kalyana Kancha (VGRK) activists led by Dr. Sudarshan to protect their land and forest wealth began soon after.

The activists are the original inhabitants of Biligiriranga and ever since the

inception of institutional forestry in 1898, efforts have been made to settle Soligas outside forest areas. VGRK has been providing health and educational facilities to the Soligas since 1981. Ever since the quarry operators descended on the revenue lands and began defiguring the hills, tribals and environmentalists have been protesting. However, since the quarrying on revenue land there was little they could do. Matters came to a head around June 1993 when the operators slowly inched towards the forests lands and came armed with land records showing pockets of revenue land within tribal forest lands.

The suppressed anger of the tribals came to the fore when two tribals Gopala Gowda (25) and Ranga Gowda (18) lost their lives during blasting operations at a quarry on Karadi Gadda. Incidentally, a quarrying license had been issued for Karadi Gadda even though the area was in the process of being notified as forest land. Close on the heels of the death of two Soligas, on November 10, trials of Bellata village fled their homes when granite blocks began to rain down on them. Two houses were completely damaged when the blasting operations commenced at a quarry just a few yards away from the colony.

To quell the protest by the tribals quarry operations went on to the colony to terrorize the activists. All 25 families fled the colony and rushed to Sudarshan for help. Meanwhile, quarry operators touched byproducts and a house at the Bellata colony.

The operators turned on Sudarshan and his band of volunteers when the VGRK found that the operators in collusion with revenue and

irrigation department officials had fabricated land records enabling quarrying operations just a few yards away from Krishnaryana Kattu, another irrigation dam, located on to the tribals for pisciculture, 8 kms from Bellata. The tribals are determined to continue their struggle. "We cannot stop with the fear of bulldozers mining on us. Women are afraid of moving one other dark wearing reptiles from the quarry workers. This cannot go on. Let the miners do their blasting away from our homes and farms. Till then we will continue to protest", says Kadari Gowda of Bellata village.

K. Jada Madamma of Shanivaramada is equally emphatic. "What business do these quarry men have to bury our lands under tonnes of debris? Why do they have to take our lives? What is the government doing?" she asks determined to fight the quarry men. Following the protests by the tribals, the district administration did initiate some security measures but these are only on paper. Though blasting has been banned near Bellata and prohibitory orders imposed, the quarrying continues. Similarly, restrictions by the deputy commissioner Vijaybhaskar against quarrying near Krishnaryana Kattu have had no impact. The coming weeks might ensure that these orders are implemented but the danger to the lives of the tribals and the sanctuary is far from over.

With the administration ineffective against the muscle and money power of the operators, and with the clear direction from the State Government, the struggle continues. The total destruction of wildlife preserves and the home of the tribals is on the cards.





Injustice Compounded

department would hand over the arrested tribals to VGKK for exactly 24 hours to explore legal avenues to continue this struggle. Both parties agreed not to work on the land for the next 24 hours. A bond was signed and the tribals were dropped off at their land. The forest officials wanted to drop them home, but the women were adamant. They wanted to stay at the land even though their tents were razed and belongings

scattered. Around 1 am, the 10 women, nine children and two men returned home.

In these 24 hours, all the legal avenues available were explored. Officials from every department of the government - revenue, forest, police, administration - met and the case was discussed threadbare. It was finally decided to call for a stakeholders meeting. Harsh Gaur, the Deputy Commissioner at Chamurajpur, was at the forefront of these efforts - the Tahsildar, Zilla Panchayat, Forest Department, Police, Revenue department, tribal leaders, farmers of Agulpur and some voluntary organisations were all invited to join the talks.

The Tahsildar reported evidence of farming activity on the land. The forest department persisted in calling it forest land, though there were only about 15 trees over 50 acres of land. Officials were directed to survey the land and report back in 2 days. Old records were opened up to show that there must be another 300 acres of land somewhere. The forest department did not participate in the survey. Rumours spread like wildfire. The tribals were told they would get 2-3 acres per family. As hopes went up, officers were transferred. The case changed hands, and the 300 acres of land disappeared from the records.

As of December 2005, no solution has been found. Mahadevamma and her neighbours wake up to darkness each morning.



The temporary huts that housed the Soligas razed by the Forest Department



Centre of Tribal Development

Morning protest in front of the





Learning is fun !



*A human pyramid
formation on
Independence Day*

*Morning prayer
in front of the school*





Herbal Pharmacy



25 years of Tribal Development



*Basavanna
and the tribal women
stage a skit about prevention
and biodiversity
conservation.*

*The tribal
ANM team*





View of the dormitories



7 years of Tribal Development



*Tribal women
process
Nellie, an
important NTFP
harvested in
B.R.Hills*

*Notebook
binding unit
at B.R.Hills*





The Right Livelihood award



25 years of Tribal Development



*Dr. Sudarshan
Mr. H N S...*

*Padmashree
award to
Dr. Sudarshan*





*Dharana for rights over
NTFP*



Department of Tribal Development



*Vivekananda
Seva Prashasthi
2005 was
given
to Mr. Mahadev
a tribal social
worker from
Nanjungud*

*Teamwork -
The monthly
meeting in
progress*





A Soliga in his traditional attire



25 years of Tribal Development



*Tribal people
in the ITI Centre*

*The VGKK
School team*





Biodiversity Conservation And Livelihoods

Compassion, in which all ethics must take root, can only attain its full breadth and depth if it embraces all living creatures and does not limit itself to mankind.

— Albert Schweitzer

VGKK's work in community organisation led to routes that were unplanned and uncharted. Forest fires were a major hazard for the tribal people and the forest department. The typical Soliga response to forest fires was to run away, as a small hamlet of 40-50 people would not be able to douse a forest fire which can be extremely strong. However, once the Sanghas were formed, the community decided to set up fire patrols in the dry season. The fires were then put out as soon as they were spotted and not allowed to grow in strength.

The groundwork for this was laid by the social workers, school teachers and students of VGKK school. Street theatre, skits, night school, all formed suitable avenues to share information about the issues surrounding forest fires, the need for suitable action against it and also, the old versus the new paradigm. Local wisdom says localised forest fires, though destructive, also stimulate growth of the right kind of trees.

For the Soliga, the Sangha gave the strength to take on an ancient enemy they would not otherwise have faced. ATREE, the Forest department and VGKK together started the process of education of young tribal leaders and they then took over the task of educating the community. The latest trend in the control of forest fires is that the forest department will pay the community for ensuring that no forest fires erupt.

The forest fires were sometimes started by smugglers and poachers, who used it to divert the attention of the forest department. They would set off a fire at a distance from their site of operation and would work without fear while everybody was busy fighting the fire. VGKK staff have been threatened for trying to stop sandalwood theft. Similarly, others who thought it might be useful to set a forest fire soon found themselves unsuccessful despite their best efforts.

These efforts were followed by the fight against quarrying in various places, one

Roads brought development but also facilitated poaching and quarrying





of which is chronicled by Kamal Gopinath of the Indian Express in the preceding chapter. The black granite in Chamarajanagar is of good quality. And hence there was a rush to grab it in the early 1990s. People bought land and then mined the granite on it for sale as a commercial enterprise. In some places like Manjigundi and Kalyani podu, efforts to stop quarrying started early, much before the miners could get to work.

The teachers, students and the community protested peacefully, by sitting on the rocks in 1990. Shentenne Mada of Manjigundi podu, a tribal leader, was particularly keen on retaining the beautiful granite in its natural setting. He arranged for people from the

podu to sit on the rocks round the clock. To support them, teachers from VGKK school started holding classes on the rocks by turns. These protest events eventually turned into an environmental education class for the students, some of whom recall those days fondly. To children, any change was welcome from the tedious routine of classes. So why not a class on the rocks?

Deputy Commissioner Baligar of the then, Mysore district, Assistant Commissioner Madan Gopal and other officers stood beside the Soligas in their fight against the mining mafia. The ban on granite quarrying was the like result of endless awareness building within and without the community regarding the problems caused by quarrying to the environment, to the people and to the ecosystem. IFS officer DCF Srinivas, Ranger Prasad are remembered to this day for their encouragement to the

Soligas. Despite these efforts, however, about 18 species of trees are now almost extinct according to local wildlife enthusiasts, a similar number of birds and animals are endangered. After awareness of this crept in, an ethnobotanical and entomological study of B.R. Hills was done. In recognition of these efforts, VGKK was honoured with the environment award by the Government of Karnataka in 1992.

The ethnobotanical survey documenting the medicinal plants in B.R. Hills was conducted with the support of the Department of Science and Technology. A panel of experts led by Dr S.N. Yoganarasimhan from the Regional Research Centre (Ayurveda) with assistance from VGKK staff carried out the survey from June 1992 to March 1993. The aim of the work was to identify medicinal plants and provide important ayurvedic and siddha preparations of these plants. One set of herbarium specimens of these plants was also collected.

In all, 399 flowering plants from different habitats in different seasons were collected, belonging to 79 families and 194 genera. Of these, 243 plants were identified with medicinal properties, 112 for the Ayurvedic system and 89 for the Siddha system (Yoganarasimhan, 1993). Thirty rare species were brought to light for conservation efforts. Vasa Goudar of the Coimbatore Botanical Survey of India also worked at B.R. Hills



'Sholas' are patches of high altitude stunted evergreen forests separated by undulating grasslands.





to document the flora of the region. Dr. B.R. Ramesh of the French Institute of Pondicherry produced a comprehensive account on the flora of B.R. Hills for his PhD thesis. It was one of the first detailed scientific studies of the rich biodiversity at B.R. Hills. Hilltops, like the one near Bedagudi, situated in the sholas are rich in biodiversity. These were identified in the sanctuary, thus identifying priority areas for conservation.

At the same time, a forest nursery to grow 1 lakh plants of indigenous species was started in VGKK to preserve the biodiversity of the forest. Around this time, Veerappan transformed from a small time sandalwood smuggler to a dreaded brigand. At the same time, people were luring tribal youth with the wealth of poaching and smuggling. They had to be educated about the dangers of poaching and smuggling. The school teachers stepped in with street plays about the long-term results of poaching and smuggling.

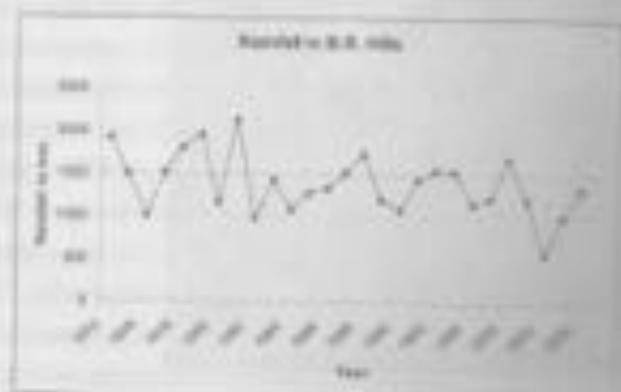
Biodiversity conservation

The Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary covers an area of 540 sq. km. The hills are situated at the northernmost tip of the Nilgiris, and thus form a part of the range that connects the Eastern and the Western Ghats. The floral and faunal elements bear affinities to both the eastern and the western ghats. B.R.Hills comprises roughly four parallel hill ranges running north to south. The central pair is taller, with the highest peak, Kattari Betta, rising to over 1,800m above sea level. These hills bear tropical moist deciduous forest, and at higher elevations, tropical evergreen forest. The hilltops are covered with mosaic patches of shola-grassland.

B.R. Hills receives rainfall from both the south-western and the retreating (NE) monsoon, with an average annual precipitation of c.600mm in the periphery and c.3,000 mm in the higher elevations. Recording of meteorological data such as rainfall and temperature on a daily basis has been one of the ongoing activities at VGKK since 1984.

The undulating terrain supports a range of vegetation types – dry scrub at the lower altitudes, to woodland savanna and deciduous forests at the middle elevations, to evergreen forests, shola forests and grasslands at higher altitudes. The forests of B.R. Hills are home to the Indian elephant, gaur, sambar, chital, barking deer and the four horned antelope. Also found are the tiger, leopard, wild dog, sloth bear and smaller mammals such as the common langur, bonnet macaque, several civets, and the Malabar giant squirrel.

The most recent study (Srinivasan and Prashanth, 2005) documents 254 species of birds and the southernmost known record of the Tickell's Thrush (*Turdus unicolor*). The avifauna includes seven endemic and several endangered species such as the Yellow-throated bulbul (*Pycnonotus xantholeucus*), Nilgiri wood-pigeon (*Columba elphinstoni*)



Courtesy: Ramachar





and Rufous-bellied eagle (*Hieroetetus kienerii*). Twenty-two species of reptiles, 15 species of amphibians and 38 species of mammals have been recorded. More than a third of Western Ghats butterflies (141 species) and a tenth of India's ants, including many recorded for the first time, occur in B.R. Hills (Ganeshiah & Umashankar 1998, Srinivas et al 1997). B.R. Hills has been designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) – a priority area for conservation (Islam and Rahmani, 2004). With such a rich biodiversity, the hills are not devoid of human habitation. There is a common misconception that forests and biodiversity conservation cannot go hand-in-hand with people and their livelihoods.

VGKK's strategy for livelihood security among the Soligas is multi-pronged. It includes awareness raising, education and skill development in the areas of vocational training; sustainable agriculture and value-addition and scientific harvesting of forest produce. The first service was vocational training, started in 1983, followed closely by sustainable agriculture in 1984. Value-addition of forest produce started with honey and tamarind processing in 1986, and expanded slowly to the current menu of over 30 products. Participatory resource monitoring and scientific research into sustainable harvesting were begun in 1998.



*The Dodda Sampige tree
revered by the Soligas*

The Dodda Sampige tradition

The Soliga considers himself to be a part of the biosphere and believes that the damage on the elements of his biosphere directly impacts him. Hence, generations of tribals have evolved intricate and detailed practices, stories, and traditions to accord protection to various elements of his environment. A huge Champaka (*Michaelia champaca*) tree held in reverence by all the Soligas, is an example of how 'sacred groves' have conservation value. Many other smaller groves dot the forests.

Biodiversity conservation and the livelihoods of these people are intricately linked. After having given up shifting cultivation in 1972 and being forced to settle down in permanent locations, the Soligas, like many other indigenous people in India had to deal with a slew of legislations that sought to divest rights over the forests. The laws passed with the noble intention of wildlife protection have done a lot of good in terms of establishing protected areas where the interests of the wildlife are supreme.

However, they failed to recognise the rights of the tribals and have completely neglected their basic needs. The people have

been systematically disenfranchised and alienated from the forest and its management. Such a vertical approach to conservation is hence detrimental to the rights of the tribals and a participatory approach to conservation is the need of the hour. One such model of an inclusive, sustainable and participatory approach has been piloted in B.R. Hills in collaboration with ATREE and the Forest department.





Collaboration with ATREE

The Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment (ATREE) was established in 1996 with a mission "to integrate rigorous natural and social sciences with policy, education and socially responsible conservation action". The inter-related issues of livelihoods enhancement of the Soligas and biodiversity conservation have been at the heart of ATREE's work in B.R. Hills. A vibrant collaboration with ATREE and Forest Department has demonstrated how sustainable harvesting of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) can be achieved. B.R. Hills is thus the only forest area in the country where collection and extraction of NTFPs is being monitored and where the local community is being involved through Participatory Resource Monitoring (PRM) (Shanker K et al., 2005). ATREE has generated detailed GIS based maps for forest fire monitoring, habitat mapping and other purposes. They are also involved in training forest department personnel in management of the sanctuary. The collaboration with ATREE began with the help of Dr. Kamal Bawa who has been instrumental in steering socially responsible scientific and conservation initiatives in B.R. Hills.

Livelihood security: Non-Timber Forest Produce

The Soligas harvest a variety of NTFPs - honey, amla (*Phyllanthus emblica*), bamboo, agriberry, lichen, magaliberu and components of triphala (*Terminalia bellinica*, *T. chebulu* and *P. emblica*). Over 70 plants species are harvested for medicinal purpose alone, nearly 15 for commercial purpose and several more for subsistence. This herbal medicine was supplemented by dream interpretation, prayer, rituals and faith.

In 1998, VGKK in collaboration with ATREE initiated a participatory resource monitoring (PRM) programme with the Soligas, which built on their traditional knowledge of resource distribution and productivity. The objectives of the participatory resource monitoring are to make the community aware of the importance of participatory resource monitoring; to determine the level of extraction in relation to productivity; to assess the rate at which resources are regenerating; to monitor changes in productivity due to variations in the environment and due to diseases and parasites; and to obtain constant feedback from the community about conservation and management of resources.

The purpose of this programme was to evolve a participatory process for tracking temporal and spatial patterns of NTFP availability in order to inform harvest decisions. The components of the PRM programme include pre-harvest meetings to obtain estimates of resource availability and discuss harvest techniques, and post-harvest meetings to determine quantities harvested and techniques



Soliga harvesting NTFP





Collaboration with ATREE

The Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment (ATREE) was established in 1996 with a mission "to integrate rigorous natural and social sciences with policy, education and socially responsible conservation action". The inter-related issues of livelihoods enhancement of the Soligas and biodiversity conservation have been at the heart of ATREE's work in B.R. Hills. A vibrant collaboration with ATREE and Forest Department has demonstrated how sustainable harvesting of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) can be achieved. B.R. Hills is thus the only forest area in the country where collection and extraction of NTFPs is being monitored and where the local community is being involved through Participatory Resource Monitoring (PRM) (Shanker K et al., 2005). ATREE has generated detailed GIS based maps for forest fire monitoring, habitat mapping and other purposes. They are also involved in training forest department personnel in management of the sanctuary. The collaboration with ATREE began with the help of Dr. Kamal Bawa who has been instrumental in steering socially responsible scientific and conservation initiatives in B.R. Hills.

Livelihood security: Non-Timber Forest Produce

The Soligas harvest a variety of NTFPs - honey, amla (*Phyllanthus emblica*), bamboo, sagdeberu, lichen, magaliberu and components of triphala (*Terminalia bellerica*, *T. chebulu* and *P. emblica*). Over 70 plants species are harvested for medicinal purpose alone, nearly 45 for commercial purpose and several more for subsistence. This herbal medicine was supplemented by dream interpretation, prayer, rituals and faith.

In 1998, VGKK in collaboration with ATREE initiated a participatory resource monitoring (PRM) programme with the Soligas, which built on their traditional knowledge of resource distribution and productivity. The objectives of the participatory resource monitoring are to make the community aware of the importance of participatory resource monitoring; to determine the level of extraction in relation to productivity; to assess the rate at which resources are regenerating; to monitor changes in productivity due to variations in the environment and due to diseases and parasites; and to obtain constant feedback from the community about conservation and management of resources.

The purpose of this programme was to evolve a participatory process for tracking temporal and spatial patterns of NTFP availability in order to inform harvest decisions. The components of the PRM programme include pre-harvest meetings to obtain estimates of resource availability and discuss harvest techniques, and post-harvest meetings to determine quantities harvested and techniques



Tribal harvesting Nelli





A PRM in progress

used. Productivity, extraction and regeneration of NTFP form the crux of all these meetings. Estimated production, extraction and regeneration are compared with the actual figures bringing scientific methodology and traditional knowledge.

During the last 6 years, about 500 PRM meetings involving about 7,000 people have been conducted. Siddappa Shetty and C Made Gowda of ATREE, in addition, ATREE has prepared trainers' manuals on participatory resource monitoring and supported awareness campaigns, for example, through a 'jathari' travelling folk theatre group to highlight conservation and natural resource management issues. Training sessions

issues related to NTFP harvesting, PRM, and conservation have been held. The BRT Wildlife Sanctuary is the only forest area in India where production, extraction and regeneration of NTFPs are being monitored, and where the local community is involved in such monitoring.

NTFP processing enterprise

In order to increase economic returns from NTFPs to harvesters, VGKK, in conjunction with ATREE, established an enterprise in 1986 for the processing and value addition of NTFPs, especially of wild honey and fruits gathered from the forest. The enterprise maintains records of production, extraction, and regeneration of NTFPs.

About 30 Soligas have been trained in processing, marketing, and maintaining accounts, and work full-time with the enterprise unit in various capacities. The enterprise has a membership of 869 harvesters. For two years the returns from the profits, about Rs. 300,000, have been distributed amongst the members in the form of utensils and educational scholarships.

Reform of Large-scale Adivasi Multi Purpose Societies (LAMPS)

The Large-scale Adivasi Multi Purpose Society (LAMPS) is a key element in the success of efforts at forest conservation through forest-based enterprises in BRT. Non-timber products harvested from the forest can only be sold to LAMPS. It is essential that the benefits accruing to harvester per unit harvested is maximised for the



Jadappa of the honey section





From the forest to the university to the forest again

C Made Gowda from Bangali Podu, builds bridges between indigenous knowledge and the technical know-how, as he carries out the PRM exercise at podus. The traditional knowledge of the forests learnt at his father's knee and the modern techniques of harvesting and conservation learnt in the course of his studies are blended to the service of conservation in BR Hills. He completed his Masters in Social Work in 1998 from Roshni Nilaya, the school of social work in Mangalore, and simultaneously completed a diploma in Personnel Management and Industrial Relations. He then joined VGKK as the assistant coordinator playing a major role in community organisation. After two years, he joined ATREE as a research associate to document ties between the tribals and the forests. But his quest for knowledge remains.

He is now awaiting the results of his thesis for an MSc degree in Sustainable Development where he has compared the functioning of the three LAMPS in Chamarajanagar district. This however doesn't make C. Mada a paper activist. He is also to be found on the streets with the other Soligas as they fight restrictive laws and injustices. The forests, he says, suffer simply because of a lack of a holistic view of the situation. The ministry of environment and forests, the ministry of tribal affairs, the ministry of mines and geology, the ministry of public works and all concerned ministries should work together to bring out a comprehensive policy that deals with every aspect of forests, rather than the piece-meal policies being churned out now. His achievement is all the more remarkable because he is one of the first six students at the school at VGKK.



C. Made Gowda participates in a protest against the ban on NTFPs

continued involvement of harvesters in managing and conserving the natural resource. A large part of our effort at strengthening existing institutions has therefore been directed toward the reform of LAMPS, both at the community level and at the level of the directors.

While many sanctuaries in the country are grappling with increasing human-wildlife conflict and vanishing tigers, the BRT Wildlife Sanctuary has been a model for harmonious co-existence. This was even pointed out by the Report of the Tiger Task Force constituted by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India. The BRT wildlife sanctuary is probably the most studied experiment in sustainable use of minor forest product or non-timber forest produce. It is one of the few sanctuaries where such extraction has not only been systematically managed, but also closely monitored for a decade by the forest department, ecologists, and conservation organisations as well as groups engaged in rural development in the region. All the stakeholders and observer





groups unanimously agree that the collection of non-timber forest produce is a sustainable source of livelihood for tribal people, if suitably managed.



No-plastics campaign in school

Environmental education

In the early 1980s, S. Ramachandra, one of the first students, was sent into the forest with his classmates to identify and collect as many plants as they could. Just 15 years of age, he identified an astounding 182 plants and trees. He went on to do his Masters in Botany and now he knows their names in Latin as well! He now teaches his integrated indigenous and western knowledge to the students in the forestry course.

In a collaborative effort with ATREE and Kalpavriksh, an environment action group, VGKK has recently initiated a programme to integrate research data with traditional knowledge in order to synergise

conservation and cultural values. This conservation education programme, which emphasises "learning for life" using a "head-heart-hands approach", will initially involve students of the VGKK school. We plan to extend the conservation education programme to the larger community. It will be local, small-scale, and appropriate to the B.R. Hills context. One of the activities related to this conservation education programme has been a no-plastics campaign involving school children, local shopkeepers and the local community.

Tiger Task Force Report on the BRT Wildlife Sanctuary

... tribal cooperatives were formed to regulate the collection of forest produce, purchase the produce at fixed rates and then auction it off. The government created it under the state forest department to collect and sell non-timber forest produce, besides managing other activities for the state's tribals. Before the societies were created, the tribals used to sell the produce at a pittance to a city contractor who had bagged the rights for collection from the forest department.

Over the last eight years, the arrangement developed into a systematic process with the involvement of two other non-governmental organisations: the Virchananda Ghorpura Kalyan Kendra and the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment. The former has been organising the people into self-help groups, and ensuring value addition, such as packaging honey into bottles. The latter has been monitoring the impact of extraction on forest health as well as working with the tribals to develop a participatory





self-monitoring mechanism.

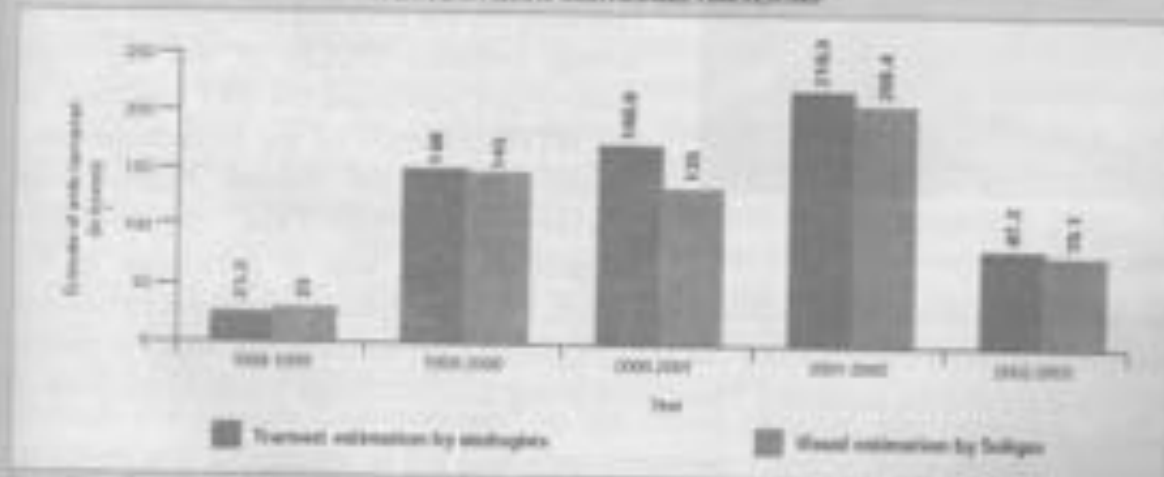
It has taken the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra almost two decades to set up the entire infrastructure. Now they have a secondary high school for the Soliga, a primary health centre and a honey processing factory; they also provide alternative employment through other vocational activities. In the last two years, profits have been ploughed back to the community from all their activities.

Ecologist Siddapa Shetty of the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment has been carrying out research in the sanctuary for the past eight years. He has studied the extraction of honey as well as amla by the Soliga. Shetty reiterates that they did not have to teach the Soliga what sustainable harvesting was (see graph: The Soliga know sustainable harvesting).

The Soliga are themselves very selective and systematic about collecting lichen, amla and honey. It is not random and certainly not exploitation. His studies show that they harvest 29 per cent of the fruits of *P. emblica* (one of the varieties of amla) each year and only 60 per cent fruits of *P. Indofischeri* (the other variety). This percentage of overall collection of fruits does not seem to have a negative impact on the regeneration of fruiting trees (one measure of sustainability of extraction). In fact, studies show the Soliga in the sanctuary are far more advanced in their collection practices than the tribals in some other forested regions of the Western Ghats.



THE SOLIGA KNOW SUSTAINABLE HARVESTING



Source: Siddapa Shetty, 2002. Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment. Unpublished report.





Capacity building

The Tribal Co-operative and Marketing Development Federation Limited (TRIFED), Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India identified VGKK as the lead agency for dissemination of honey harvesting techniques and sustainable harvesting to other VO's and tribals in 2003. The training to upgrade the skills of traditional honey hunters will impart techniques for sustainable harvesting and processing, social mapping and quantification of honey combs. About 190 honey hunters SHGs are being formed for sustainable enterprise development and they are being equipped with marketing linkages and networks.

Experienced honey hunters with the necessary skills have been identified to conduct these training programmes with the aim to alleviate poverty among tribals in Chamarajanagar, Kollegal and Yelandur blocks. In all, 1,150 traditional honey hunters who are also members of LAMPS will be trained in 35 batches over a period of 2 years. VGKK is the nodal agency in the state implementing unit, which also includes other agencies like Khadi and Village Industries Board (KVIB), BAIF, Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM), Myrada and LAMPS Federation. Training manuals have been prepared for use by other agencies. Protective suits and appropriate tools for harvesting and processing will be given to the honey hunters after the capacity building exercise.



Soliga women process NTFP

The campaign for livelihood security through NTFPs collection

Following widespread abuse of forests and forest resources, the Supreme Court banned collection of NTFPs all over India. The ban was enforced on February 22, 2004. The information was immediately conveyed to relevant agencies and enforced strictly. On February 23, the principal chief conservator of forests (wildlife) (PCCF) of the Karnataka government instructed the BRT sanctuary to ban NTFP collection by the tribal cooperative society. Large-scale Adivasi Multipurpose Society (LAMPS). This, the wildlife department said, was in pursuance of the

amended section of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 which does not permit removal of forest produce from the sanctuary (Section 29), other than for bona fide needs of people living in and around the sanctuary. This notice brought 20,000 Soliga tribals to the brink of destitution.

Of the 20,000 strong community, more than half are dependent in some way on NTFPs for their livelihood. The others were dependent on forest produce to smelt





extents. Once the ban was enforced, they were unable to collect honey which forms a part of their staple diet, for their own consumption, leave alone NTFPs for sale.

It is ironic that the ban intended to protect forests which have been over-harvested, equally affects all people including the Soligas of BRT Wildlife Sanctuary who have been protecting the forests from vested interests for the past several decades. The Soliga community, LAMPS, Zila Budakattu Girijana Abhivruddhi Sangha and the Soliga Abhivruddhi Sanghas met to discuss the ban and its impact. The Sanghas also met at the village, taluk and district levels and decided to protest against the ban.



Women participate prominently in protests

The first step was to meet the DCF in Chamarajanagar to clarify the situation and seek suggestions. The DCF expressed his helplessness in rescinding the ban unilaterally. He recommended that they contact the senior people in the political and bureaucratic circles. The Kannada media also expressed an interest and an article was published in Vijay Karnataka. A press release was then drafted to communicate the problems faced by tribals following the ban on NTFP collection.

They also decided to meet the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF), minister of forests, secretary of the ministry of environment and forests, and other policy makers in Bangalore. A memorandum detailing their problems and requesting that the ban on NTFPs be lifted was drafted on March 16, 2004. The next week, the memo was submitted to political leaders including the deputy chief minister, Members of Legislative Assembly from this region (Parimala Nagappa, Vatal Nagaraj, Balaraju Dhruvanarayan, Mahadev Prasad), Shivanna, Member of Parliament and bureaucrats including the PCCF, Secretary of the Department of Environment and Forests, Director, Tribal affairs, and the Commissioner and Secretary of the Social Welfare Department.

Having exhausted the political option, the Soligas decided to hold a public demonstration in Chamarajanagar on April 13, 2004. About 2,500 tribals from Kollegal, Gundlupet, Chamarajanagar and Gundlupet congregated in Chamarajanagar town. They took out a procession from PWD bungalow to the Deputy Commissioner's office. Along the way, they gave out handbills, sang songs and raised slogans. They also held a short rally at Pachappa Circle for about 15-20 minutes to raise awareness among the local people. With the support of about 2,500-3,000 people, a memorandum was submitted through the Deputy Commissioner to the Prime Minister, the President, and the ministers and secretaries of the following ministries: Central Tribal Affairs, Ministry of Forests, Ministry of Social Welfare, and the PCCF.





This was covered by the local press and people in the plains became aware of the problems of the tribals. However, there was no response from the political and bureaucratic policy makers. The Soligas waited patiently and followed up with the DC and concerned policy makers in Bangalore. They also requested another meeting with the PCCF in Bangalore. Tribal leaders in Karnataka and Kerala met in Wynad to discuss the problems and their strategies. Down to Earth magazine featured two articles on the issue.

A second strike was planned and held on September 27, 2005 in Chamarajanagar. Again about 2,000 tribals from Chamarajanagar district participated in the strike. Press releases were issued and the support of the media was sought. Following

this display of people power, the Soliga leaders received reassurances from the government officials that they would take up the matter with the policy-makers in Bangalore and Delhi.

Throughout this period, government officials were being transferred in and out and new officers transferred in. New officers had to be met, informed of the issue and sensitised to the problems of the people. In early 2005, efforts began to form the BRT Wildlife Sanctuary Conservation Committee bringing together all the stakeholders – temple

authorities, forest department, VOs, tourist authorities, and tribal leaders – on a common platform to ensure the sustainable development of BRT. Researchers, tribals and conservationists worked together to produce a solution to the problems caused by the ban on NTFPs.

One year after the last procession, no solution was forthcoming. And so the Soligas took to the streets again on August 22, 2005. Over 2,000 people came to Chamarajanagar again for a march through

*Nature does nothing
uselessly.*

– Aristotle



Malchedda, a kind of pulse which is indigenous to B.R. Hills was discovered during a Beeja Mela and is now widely grown by organic farmers in Kolar, Kanakapura, Koppal, Tal, Terubendi and other places. Sannaranga, a Soliga, told other farmers about the multi-use plant. The tender leaves can be cooked and eaten. The grains can be ground and cooked with ragi. It can also be fried and mixed with honey to be eaten as sweet balls.



Soapnuts for sale





the streets, with slogans, handbills, songs and dances. This time, the people, led by the women refused to leave the DCF's office without a definite solution to their problems. The DCF, DC and other authorities agreed that the Soligas did not harm the forest. They also accepted that BRT had piloted a working model to balance the rights of the forests and the rights of the forest people. A study of the laws revealed that the PCCF had special powers under Section 29 of the State Wildlife Board. The then DCF of Chamarajanagar Mr Dixit recommended that the ban could be lifted to maintain the balance between sustainability and dependence.

This combined strategy of strong lobbying at the policy level and stiff opposition by the Sanghas at the grassroots level was effective. Appropriate field research, sound traditional knowledge and timely community action played an important role in this. Dr Sudarshan, 20 tribal leaders, Conservator and DCF of Chamarajanagar and the PCCF met at a stakeholders meeting in Bangalore and the PCCF then agreed to act on the recommendation of Dr. Raju, the present DCF to rescind the ban.

BRT Wildlife Sanctuary Conservation Committee : A significant step in participatory approach

Decisions affecting the sanctuary need to be sensitive to the local needs and should take into consideration the wider social and cultural aspects of the people affected. Broader realisation of this resulted in the coming together of the Forest Department, ATREE, VGKK, Jungle Lodges and Resorts, temple authorities and Soliga leaders under the banner of the BRT Wildlife Sanctuary Conservation Committee in May 28, 2005.

It is indeed a great step towards making developmental and conservation processes more participatory and consultative. It indicates a very healthy trend among the policy-makers and brings together all the people affecting the sanctuary and affected by it. The committee offers a common platform where researchers, social workers, decision-makers and tribals can share information on the various aspects of the sanctuary. It meets once in 3 months.

Watershed development

VGKK has recently undertaken a watershed development project in the Boodipadaga region of Chamarajanagar district. The project covers both tribal lands as well as degraded forest land. VGKK will motivate the people in the region to donate their time and labour to build tank beds, water tanks, and other such eco-friendly measures. Such measures will ensure that rain water does not flow out of the region, but remains long enough to be absorbed. In the short run, it will ensure a small rise in ground water levels. In the long run, such measures will make the region fertile and farmer friendly again.

The combined strategy of strong lobbying at the policy level and stiff opposition at the grassroots level was effective. Appropriate field research, sound traditional knowledge and timely community action played an important role in this policy reversal.





*School children learn
all about papayas*

Livelihood security: sustainable agriculture

Since the government allowed the Soliga to practise agriculture within the reserve forest, it was essential that the returns from agriculture increased to improve their well-being. Towards this end, a demonstration plot was started in 1984 when Kalappa, a social worker in the Nilgiris, was convinced to come to B.R.Hills. Under his tutorship, the school children and staff started cultivating fruit trees like papayas, bananas for immediate returns and jackfruits, butterfruits and citrus fruits for long-term benefits. A vegetable garden was also cultivated. This had many effects: increasing nutrition in school children; teaching horticulture methods to students; and bringing the concept of kitchen garden to the tribals.

New vegetables were introduced and hybrid varieties of all vegetables were also experimented with. The successful ones were propagated among the tribals. Soon, it was felt that merely increasing nutrition was not sufficient, it should be balanced with some cash crops as well. This would help them to buy clothes, grains, oil and other essentials to life. Coffee, ginger, timber and fruit trees were encouraged. After one successful experiment, ginger cultivation was stopped due to high depletion of soil fertility. Coffee, silver oak, banana and papaya were encouraged.

B. Jade Gowda, a Soliga from Yerkanagadde podu was one of the first to plant silver oak in 1985. Twenty years later, he sold the entire lot and used the income to buy acres of agricultural land near Punajur. He also leased an additional 10 acres of land to grow ragi and jowar. With the help of the silver oak trees, he is a large farmer now, and an inspiration to the small and marginal farmers among the Soligas. Sidde Gowda, an entrepreneur and farmer earned Rs 1 lakh from his coffee harvest in 1987. This money went into the construction of a pucca house and subsequent harvests have been invested in the education of his daughters. Despite these success stories, VGKK decided not to pursue the development of hybrids, cash crops and other monocrops. We turned instead, to traditional methods of agriculture, including organic farming.

As of 2005, VGKK is setting up an organic coffee demonstration plot and coffee nursery to promote coffee. Instead of the concept of a coffee monocrop plantation, multi-cropping is being promoted with shady fruit trees like citrus, pepper, jack and jamun. This will also help in retaining water, reduce soil erosion, produce more green manure for eco-friendly income generation. The salubrious climate at B.R. Hills is ideal for this purpose. Four self-help groups of coffee growers have been promoted with the support of the Coffee Board and given pulping machines, sprayers, jute mats and seedlings. The SHGs will be empowered to especially negotiate the sale price of coffee beans and purchase price of inputs. It is expected that in a next decade these SHGs will help farmers earn enough from coffee for the education and well-being of their families.





Beja Yatre

Seed banks and conservation of seed diversity

In collaboration with Green Foundation, VGKK implemented a project to conserve biodiversity in rural and tribal areas of Yelandur taluk. It involved raising awareness among farmers about the benefits of organic farming, indigenous seeds and natural fertilisers in both fields and kitchen gardens. The project was implemented in two phases: In 2001-2002, it was implemented in Siddanahundi (T. Narasipura, Mysore district) and Alkere (Yelandur, Chamarajanagar district); in 2003-2004, it was implemented in Hunsur (T. Narasipura, Mysore district) and B.R. Hills (Yelandur, Chamarajanagar district). Each project covered 4-8 villages and initially only about 25 percent of the women were willing to join the project despite repeated motivation sessions.

The first step was to raise awareness among the farmers and reduce the misinformation among them. There was stiff opposition from people and enterprises who made their profits by selling highly priced chemical inputs for farmers, and lent money to farmers at high rates of interests. This opposition manifested itself in a disinformation campaign that had to be checked. B. Ananda, the field officer who implemented the project for VGKK, remembers that farmers were told indigenous ragi would take 8 months to grow, as against the three months for hybrid varieties. They were also told that their land was now so dependent on chemicals that there would be no yield at all without chemicals.



Organic farmers choose seeds for next year's crop





The work started with an agricultural survey that documented the indigenous and hybrid species being grown in the area. This was followed by a PRA exercise with farmers' and women's groups to map seeds in three time zones – 1940, 1980, and 2001. An exposure trip to see other organic farms and interact with organic farmers was arranged. The entry point of this project through the Mahila Sanghas was also useful as women were already aware of the health problems caused by chemicals. They were also aware of the fact that some indigenous varieties produced more flour, gave more strength and were tastier to eat. A 'Beeja Mela' was organised to increase awareness and introduce farmers to indigenous seeds.

In 2000, Basavarajappa was the only farmer in Yelandur taluk who grew Ratnachuda, a tasty but small-grained multi-purpose paddy. In 2005, 8-10 varieties of rice paddy have been revived and are being grown in the taluk.

Such events allowed farmers to interact with each other and discuss their doubts and queries and seek clarification and the disinformation campaign was neutralised. A 'Beeja Yatre' to disseminate information was then held. Women took indigenous seeds in a procession from village to village and shared their knowledge with others who were interested. This was followed by a series of training sessions in various areas like water harvesting and soil improvement, basket compost training, kitchen garden training, vermi-compost training and natural pesticide training. Women and men farmers who had tried out these techniques successfully, technical experts from universities, VO workers, and government extension workers were all invited as resource persons for these trainings. Trainings were held in different villages and also in B.R. Hills to allow the farmers to visit other places, interact with a wider cross section of people and learn more.

This was followed by a strong monitoring and dissemination campaign to support the spread of the organic farming. As the first success stories started trickling in, more and more farmers wanted to join the project. Following newspaper articles in the vernacular media

about this project, VGKK has received letters from people all over Karnataka including Dharwad, Madikeri, Mysore, Gulbarga, Almel, Hospet, Achade and Sikaripura. They have included requests for information and for purchase of seeds.

In 2000, Basavarajappa was the only farmer in Yelandur taluk who grew Ratnachuda, a tasty but small-grained multi-purpose paddy. In 2005, 8-10 varieties of rice paddy have been revived and are being grown in the taluk. Farmers have opted to return to traditional farming techniques because of its financial implications. Hybrid paddy seeds have to be purchased at each sowing season at a cost of Rs 5 per kg. This has to be supplemented with an array of fertilisers, pesticides and other chemical supplements. The rice is then sold at Rs 11-12 per kg. Ratnachuda paddy seeds are available at Rs 9-10 per kg in the market, and can also be borrowed from the seed bank. There are no additional costs for inputs as mulch, vermi-compost and manure are used. However, the labour of the farmer in the field is higher. The rice is sold for Rs 16-17 per kg in the market. Seeds borrowed from the seed bank can be returned at twice the amount. The total income from the farm





Community Seed Bank Project - Seed Mapping Process: 2001-2 and 2003-4

Crop	1960	1980	2002	2005
Ragi	Karikaddi ragi Bilikaddi ragi Karimudde ragi Majige ragi Red ragi Chali ragi	Karikaddi ragi Karimudde ragi Palaga ragi	Karikaddi ragi Palaga ragi	Karikaddi ragi Mudde ragi Red ragi
Paddy	Kaddisanna paddy 1 1/2 paddy Hoti kembuti paddy Mundla paddy Kombana sanna paddy Ratnachudi paddy Bangaragovi paddy	Ratnachudi paddy Kaddisanna paddy Jenuguda paddy	Ratnachudi paddy	Ratnachudi paddy Gandhanale paddy Salem sanna paddy Basumati paddy Jeeragasanna paddy
Jowar/ Maize	Hasirugobina jowar Red jowar Makara jowar Chali jowar	Makara jowar Chali jowar	Makara jowar	-
Avare	Red avare Sinagina avare	Red avare	Red avare	Red avare Sinagina avare
Alsande	White alsande Red alsande	White alsande Red alsande	White alsande Red alsande	White alsande Red alsande
Vegetables	Bili motte brinjal Nerale motte brinjal Sweet tomato Sour tomato Balla beans Mantha pumpkin Thuppa ridge gourd Sakkare pumpkin	Bili motte brinjal Mysore brinjal Madike brinjal Sour tomato Mantha pumpkin Jeeraga chili Badagi chili	Motte brinjal Udyana brinjal Sour tomato Mantha pumpkin Sakkare pumpkin Jeeraga chili Black beans	Motte brinjal Udyana brinjal Mara brinjal Balla beans Mantha pumpkin Jeeraga chili Kale carrot Thuppa ridge gourd

increases, because of the low expenses while reducing the impact on the soil.

In B.R. Hills, 10 varieties of bananas were found. Tribal and non-tribal farmers were enlisted to grow these varieties, thereby increasing the bio-diversity of bananas. Two farmer-owned seed banks have been set up to enable Soligas to obtain native seeds for the next sowing season. Farmer-to-farmer exchange of information on improved agro-forestry practices have proved successful. ATREE has initiated training in compost making, home gardens, coffee growing and skills that farmers will need to enhance their livelihoods, protect the soil, and restore on-farm biodiversity.





Reaching Out

*There are only two mistakes one can make along the road to truth;
not going all the way, and not starting.*

- Buddha

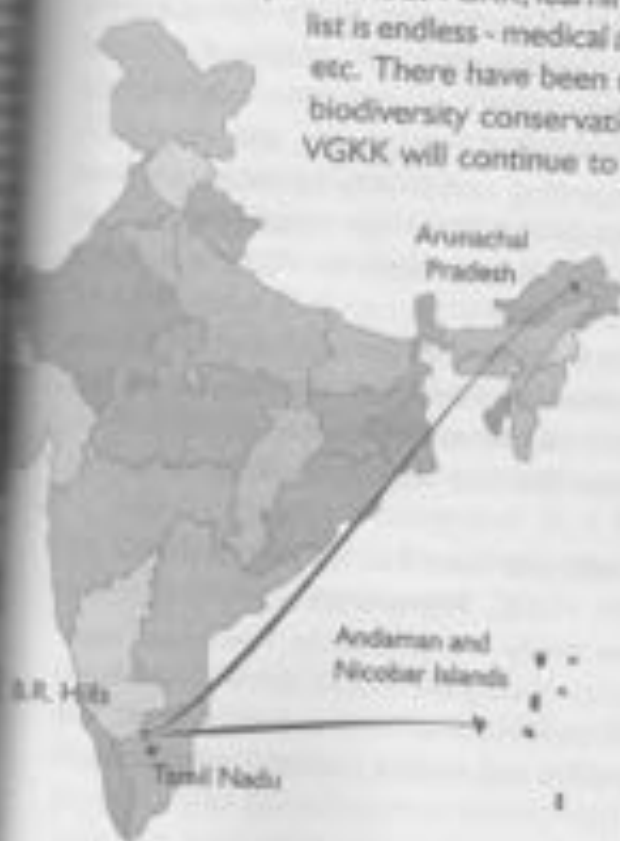
As VGKK grew, it became important to share the learnings gained in the field - foremost among them, the close connections between development in health, education, livelihoods and biodiversity conservation. Integration of indigenous and mainstream knowledge in the course of development, especially in the field of community health, is a close second. The conversion of development ideologies into reality is a long and winding road that is filled with challenges, lessons and surprises. Of what use are those lessons if they are not disseminated widely?

Over the last 25 years, there have been a large number of individuals who have come and spent time at VGKK, learning from us and teaching us at the same time. The list is endless - medical and paramedical staff, managers, entrepreneurs, etc. There have been many others who have conducted research on biodiversity conservation, tribal issues, sustainable development etc. VGKK will continue to support such initiatives which will lead to the

dissemination of our learnings. We regularly get students from various institutions - Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, Roshini Nilaya, Mangalore, and foreign universities - who intern at VGKK, carrying back valuable experience in working in challenging environments and leaving behind nuggets of their own values for us to cherish.

First forays

These ideas and the rationale came later. First came a need expressed by some Soligas who live in Hasanur in Erode district of Tamil Nadu. Shivaraje Gowda and Shamanna surveyed Gaddesalu and nine other villages in Hasanur along the Tamil Nadu-Karnataka border. Erode is a predominantly tribal district. VGKK's first task was community organisation for which meetings were held





once a month. A local monitoring system for anganwadis, Ashrama schools, land rights, tree pattas and other government benefits was started. The community organization helped to channelise government benefits like land, houses, pensions and so on to the most deserving of the tribals.

When people started coming from Hasanur to the hospital in B.R. Hills, a health unit with a nurse and compounder was established. The mobile unit from the VGKK hospital in B.R. Hills also visits the area once a month. This is presently being managed by Mahadeva, a trained Soliga tribal. He travels on a daily basis to the tribal settlements and

covers all of them each month. He interacts with the locals to learn their needs and grievances.

He carries essential drugs and arranges for referrals and transport of people to primary or secondary health care facilities as required. He coordinates with the monthly visit of the VGKK Mobile Unit and facilitates interaction with the community. He works closely with the local Government PHCs for effective implementation of National Health Programmes - defaulter retrieval in Tuberculosis, awareness and education regarding compliance to treatment and suitable referral for investigations. He even refers patients to VGKK hospital if necessary.



The mobile medical van visiting Hasanur

VGKK takes special interest in the Pulse Polio Programmes and sends a vehicle and a team to support the local Government staff for effective coverage in remote tribal podus. A social-worker-cum-teacher goes from hamlet to hamlet and house to house to follow-up on the health of the children and their families. She also taught parents and children about cleanliness, hygiene, etc.

The first social worker was a local leader who was keen that his people should get empowered and hence sought strong ties with VGKK. There were some challenging moments as well. After nine people from one family were killed by Veerappan near Hasanur, VGKK was actively discouraged from continuing the mobile service. However, the police offered to escort the van and work continued without any disruption. The police, health and other officials supported the work and made it possible to reach more people effectively.

Technology Resource Centre

In its efforts to improve the quality of life of the Soliga people, VGKK has experimented





with several kinds of technologies in various fields such as food processing, herbal medicine processing, biodiversity conservation, sustainable agriculture and low-cost building technologies. Our field workers have also proved the efficacy of some of these technologies over the past decades. In acknowledgement of this, the Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART) designated VGKK as a Technology Resource Centre for the dissemination of the technologies in 2001. There were 18 such TRCs in India and this was the first in Karnataka.

Information about these technologies is being shared with other VO's who then utilise this training for the benefit of more people. The TRC campus in Mysore has been constructed to showcase different types of low-cost building technologies such as soil-cement blocks, concrete blocks, boulder blocks, brick vault roof, filler slab and Mangalore tiled roof. It is also an expert centre for the Village Resource Centre (VRC) network of 20 PHCs all over Karnataka. A non-conventional energy park, herbal medicine demonstration plots, and a showroom to market NTFPs are other components. Situated at the foothills of the Chamundi, the TRC campus is easy to access and includes canteen and accommodation facilities for up to 30 trainees.



TRC in Mysore

Dissemination workshops held in each of the five fields of expertise are attended by trainees from all over Karnataka. Value addition to local and forest produce; development of mini-herbal gardens to strengthen local health traditions and deal with minor illnesses; participatory resource monitoring and conservation techniques for MFP harvesting; alternative agriculture methodologies such as multi-cropping, seed banks, green compost and bio-pesticides; and various kinds of low-cost, timber free housing technologies are all imparted to VO's, SHGs and other interested groups of people.

VGKK has been recognised as a Support Voluntary Organisation (SVO) and a Facilitation Centre (FC) for Community-based Rehabilitation (CBR) related projects by other Voluntary Organisations.

Andaman and Nicobar Islands

For several years, the work of VGKK confined its activities to tribals in Karnataka and the Tamil Nadu border region. The efficacy of the empowerment and development programmes did not remain unseen and unnoticed. Accolades poured in from various quarters both to the organisation as well as to Dr Sudarshan who spearheaded the revolution in the forests. It was time to expand the scope of the organisation.

The Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs invited Dr Sudarshan and VGKK to





bring their experiences and learnings to Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a member of the advisory panel that advises the government on how to take up development activity without damaging the existing civilisation of the tribal people. The islands have six indigenous tribes of the Negrito and Mongoloid races. Additionally, there are people from different parts of India who settled there during the colonial period and during the Partition. This influx of people took its toll on the indigenous population and some tribes almost died out as new diseases were brought into the islands.

The task now is to find a delicate balance between retaining their civilisation and bringing the benefits of the mainstream civilisation to them. Population and health surveys are carried out regularly in the islands, as are limited development activities in the areas of health and nutrition. The documentation of the indigenous medicinal knowledge of the tribes, especially the Jarawa tribe, has also begun. While their dependence on government welfare measures is discouraged, some amount of trade through LAMPS is allowed. Tribes which are hostile are allowed to live in peace, while those that are in touch with non-tribals are protected from exploitation.



The Jenging PHC in Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh

With the support of the governments of India and Arunachal Pradesh and the collaboration of local VO, Vivekananda Kendra, VGKK's work in the field of traditional knowledge is being extended to the people in Arunachal Pradesh with effect from April 2005. Slash and burn agriculture has, in the recent past, decimated the natural resources of the region. The tribes living in the Lower Dibang Valley have very low indicators in health, education, economy and over all development. There is an urgent need to

make them aware of the prized possessions, their natural resources. This is the purpose of the CAPART sponsored programme in Arunachal Pradesh.

Using the phrase "My health in my hands", VGKK is sensitising them to the medicinal value of their plants. A small kitchen garden is being planned which can be planted by each household. This will be the first step in the three-tier health system being practised among tribals in the forests of Karnataka. Since the lower Dibang Valley is also cut off from the rest of India for parts of the year, such a programme holds special relevance for them. Additionally, work has also started on the documentation of local plants with medicinal value.

In mid-2005, beneficiaries were identified for the setting up of community nurseries in six villages. These community nurseries will then supply saplings for the home kitchen





gardens. Awareness programmes about medicinal plants were held, attended by large numbers of women. Farmers' training programme on the cultivation of medicinal plants was also held. Farmers were trained in organic farming techniques like vermin-compost. Semi-compost pits are also being set up in all the 10 villages with the support of the Department of Agriculture. The people are very enthusiastic about the concept and are experimenting with it.

From B.R. Hills to Vijaynagar

Vijaynagar is a remote circle in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh. Enclosed by thick forests all around, and separated from the nearest habitation by 170 km on one side and the border with Myanmar on the other, the Lisus who live here are far from basic health and education. Nature Conservation Foundation, an NGO-based in Mysore, is working on an integrated approach towards conservation in the neighbouring Namdapha National Park. They decided to take up primary health care for the Lisus as a priority area along with primary education as the Lisus were the main people affecting and being affected by the Namdapha Tiger Reserve. Khyoyiyeh, a Lisu youth, was sent to VGKK by NCF to be trained in primary health care. He spent a month in B.R. Hills, learning primary health care in resource-poor settings, integration of traditional and modern medicine, the three-tier system of health care, and other aspects of VGKK's work. He is now working as a village-level health worker in Vijaynagar under the conservation programme of the NCF.





Tribal Resource Centre

A major impediment to effective development planning is the absence of an exhaustive database of information on the tribals of the district. Such a repository of information about 12 different tribal people of Karnataka is planned for the year 2005 (including Soligas, Jenu Kurubas, Betta Kurubas, Kadu Kurubas, Yeravas, Koragas and others). It is to be housed at the Technology Resource Centre with the objective of making this information available to various stakeholders - VOs, policymakers and tribal leaders. Such a centralised warehouse of information is presently not available. All the required information is scattered across various government departments and numerous VOs. Networking with other VOs working among these tribals is a part of the strategy to put the resource centre together.





Podu To Parliament

So long as millions of people live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who having been educated at their expense pays not least heed to them.

- Swami Vivekananda

Over the last 25 years, VGKK has evolved from curative health services to sustainable development, learning enroute from the community. In that sense, VGKK learnt the concept of sustainable development not from the classrooms, books, think-tanks and debates, but from the field through a natural process of community development. As each need in the area was fulfilled, new gaps emerged. And the learning continues...

VOs are known for their ingenious methodologies in programme implementation, flexibility and commitment. Micro-level interventions pioneered by VOs should be disseminated to people so that future programmes may benefit from this bottom-up experience. Advocacy is hence a very important component of VGKK. Our efforts at advocacy have been given a major push by various governmental and non-governmental organisations and people who have acknowledged our work in public.

Acknowledgement of the effectiveness of our contribution has come in the form of awards, documentation in the press and elsewhere, recognitions and membership to executive and consultative committees. These awards, recognitions and memberships to various committees have disseminated the learnings in tribal development and have resulted in having an impact at the national level in policy-making.

The **Rajyotsava Award** for social work given to Dr H. Sudarshan in 1985 by the government of Karnataka was one of the first acknowledgements of VGKK's contribution. Later on, the prestigious **Right Livelihood Award**, also called the Alternate Nobel Prize was bestowed upon him on December 9, 1994 in the Parliament of Sweden, "...for vision and work, forming an essential contribution towards making life whole, healing our planet and uplifting humanity". The Government of India honoured the work with the **Padmashree** on March 30, 2000.

More recently, the Devaraj Urs award and the B. C. Roy award were presented to him. On 13 July 2004, Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, Vice President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission presented the **Vivekananda Medal** to Dr. Sudarshan "...for his outstanding contributions to the uplift of the tribals of BR Hills in Karnataka drawing inspiration from the ideas and ideals of Swami Vivekananda". VGKK was awarded the **Bharata Ratna Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Award** by the Government of Karnataka in 2002 for "unparalleled service in tribal areas".





VGKK's path to tribal development was documented in *Anubhav*, a publication of the Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI). VHAI is a network of voluntary organisations and their support increases the geographic reach of our ideas. With strong advocacy and policy support as their focus areas, VHAI has strived for better networking among VOs working in health and community development and also for making available quality documentation of the process of VO building and impacts thereby.

The *Anubhav* series is published to disseminate information of innovative projects providing health, nutrition, family planning and community development services in India. One of the issues of *Anubhav* featured VGKK in its totality. VHAI has given VGKK the honour again in the forthcoming issue of the series on the occasion of VGKK's silver jubilee. Dr. Sudarshan was also the Joint Secretary and thereafter, the Vice President of VHAI. He was the member of the Independent Commission on Health set up by VHAI, which was set up as a people's initiative to assess the current health status and problems of health care delivery. The report of the commission was released by the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in 1998.

Dr. Sudarshan has served on various national level committees, sharing the lessons and experiences of community development. Recommendations grounded in reality and authenticity based on grassroots experiences are VGKK's major contributions. Dr. Sudarshan was a member of the steering group of the Planning Commission for Scheduled Castes, Tribes and Backward Classes, and a member of the Working Committee for Health and Family Welfare during the 9th five year plan period. During the 10th five year plan period, he was a member of the Planning Commission's steering committee on health. He is on the Executive Committee of Janasankhya Sthiratha Kosh under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister of India.



*Dr Sudarshan with the
Right Livelihood Award*





Dr Sudarshan receiving
the Padmashree from
President K.R.Narayanan

Presently, Dr Sudarshan is a member of the **National Commission on Population** and of the Expert Group on Medical Education Reform of the **National Rural Health Mission**. The most serious concern in the health sector is the qualitative and quantitative scarcity of human resources in rural areas, and the simultaneous concentration of people, hospitals and funds in urban areas. Innovative ideas to change the imbalance in quality human resources between the centre and the periphery are being proposed and discussed. Some are ideas which have been tested in other countries. Others are new ideas which would only originate within the Indian context. Among such proposals are: the nurse-practitioner model at the field level, mainstreaming of community medicine in education in all medical specialities, a cadre

of rural health practitioners who are trained over a period of three years, and tribal ANMs. It remains to be seen which of these proposals survive the long journey from idea to reality.

Another committee with a significant impact on the health care system in India has been the Working Group 6 of the **Commission on Macroeconomics and Health** of the World Health Organization (WHO), which was headed by Geoffrey Sachs. The recommendations of this committee have involved a paradigm shift in the notion of health care as not a mere adjunct to development, but as a pre-requisite for development. Major economists including Dr Manmohan Singh the present Prime Minister of India were on the team. One of the major recommendations of Working Group 6 was increased public spending on health in India from the present 0.9 % to a more realistic 2-3%. Now that Dr Singh is the Prime Minister, we can look forward to a reform of the health sector. Dr Sudarshan's presence in this committee led to direct benefit for the people of Karnataka state as well. He was able to use the recommendations to lobby with the state government for increased health spending at the state level.

Taking into consideration the wide experience of Dr. Sudarshan in public health, the Government of Karnataka appointed him as the Chairman of a **Task force on Health and Family Welfare**. The report goes into various aspects of health care in Karnataka. This was the start of an exhaustive study into the status of health care delivery in the state at primary, secondary and tertiary levels from different locations – quality of delivery as experienced by the end user, structure and ethics as experienced by those within, and perceptions and sensitivity from the policy

The most serious concern in the health sector is the qualitative and quantitative scarcity of human resources in rural areas, and the simultaneous concentration of people, hospitals and funds in urban areas. Innovative ideas are needed to change the balance in quality human resources between the centre and the periphery.





In 2000, the council of ministers led by the chief minister S.M. Krishna held a mini-cabinet meeting in B.R. Hills and also traveled to H.D. Kote to see tribal development, that would help them take decisions on how it should be pursued.

makers. The experiences during the preparation of the task force report brought Dr Sudarshan in close contact with the service delivery part of the health care system. He got to know the various strengths of the system as well as its flaws and gaps. In the final report, 12 issues of concern were listed out with corruption at the top.

The then health secretary questioned how corruption could figure in the report of the health task force. It was clarified that the main issues plaguing the public health sector were not medical, but governance issues. The then Chief minister S.M. Krishna accepted the task force report in its entirety and gave directions for its implementation. Dr Sudarshan is now a member of the implementation committee to monitor the implementation of the recommendations. More than half of the recommendations have already been implemented and the impact is being assessed.

A copy of the report was also sent to the Lokayukta which was very active in its fight against corruption. The report said there was 'an epidemic of corruption in health and education'. Retired Supreme Court Justice Venkatachala, who heads the Lokayukta read the report in detail and invited Dr Sudarshan to undertake the next step in the process of rooting out corruption. Given his deep understanding of the problems and earlier grassroots experience, he was offered the post of Director of Vigilance for health, education and social welfare departments to put an end to corruption in these sectors. Dr Sudarshan agreed to undertake this task on a monthly payment of Re. 1. There is now a wide perception that awareness about corruption has increased enormously and systems for redressal are in place.

In view of wide experiences with education of tribals and implementation of education programmes in Yelandur, Dr. Sudarshan was offered Adjunct Professorship of the Indira Gandhi Open University. He is also the member of the Task force on Primary



Task Force on Health and Family Welfare

Issues of Concern

- ✓ Corruption
- ✓ Neglect of Public Health
- ✓ Distortions in Primary Health Care
- ✓ Lack of Focus on Equity
- ✓ Implementation Gap
- ✓ Decline in Ethics
- ✓ Human Resource Development Neglected
- ✓ Cultural Gap and Medical Pluralism
- ✓ From Exclusivism to Partnership
- ✓ Ignoring the Political Economy of Health
- ✓ Research
- ✓ Countering the Growing Apathy in the System



Education of the Government of Karnataka. He has previously served as the executive committee member on the National Literary Mission. It is not merely as a people's organisation that VGKK has been acknowledged. It has also been recognised as a resource center and a nodal NGO which can train people and NGOs in various methodologies and technologies.

In view of its work within a wildlife sanctuary, VGKK has seen closely the relationship between biodiversity and livelihood security. The

importance of biodiversity conservation cannot be understated. A just and rational approach to conservation has been one of the most important learning for VGKK. The Tiger Task Force applauded the dynamics of people-biodiversity-government-VO relationship in the sanctuary.

But the words VGKK treasures the most come from the President of India, Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. Dr Abdul Kalam was then the advisor to the Prime Minister on defence matters. Having heard of Dr Sudarshan's work, he decided to visit B.R. Hills. This was just after the Coimbatore blasts and the threat of terrorism was added to the existing threat of Veerappan. His visit was organised in great secrecy despite all these threats to his life. He spent an entire day on the campus, ate lunch with our children and even washed his own plate!

"I have three visions for India. ...my first vision is that of FREEDOM. I believe that India got its first vision of this in 1857, when we started the war of independence. It is this freedom that we must protect and nurture and build on."

My second vision for India is DEVELOPMENT. For fifty years we have been a developing nation. It is time we see ourselves as a developed nation.

I have a third vision. India must stand up to the world. Because I believe that, unless India stands up to the world, no one will respect us. Only STRENGTH respects strength.

Look at Dr Sudarshan, he has transformed the tribal village into a self-sustaining, self-driving unit."

- Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (Excerpts from a speech in Hyderabad)



The Road Ahead

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep*

— Robert Frost

VGKK has now consolidated its presence in Chamarajanagar district with a hospital, a school and various income generation activities for the Soliga people. The district is considered one of the most backward districts in Karnataka.

Given the decades of experience in the planning and implementation of integrated tribal development programmes in resource-poor settings, it is time to take this ahead to help tribal people all over Karnataka and India. In addition to this, we will take our work with the Soligas further by selectively bringing the benefits of modern science which are most suitable for their lives.

Sustainable tribal and rural health management

Good health is the keystone of real development. The considerable experience and learning accumulated in sustainable tribal health management will be extended all over Karnataka through an ANMs training school to be set up in B.R. Hills. Youth tend to take up urban-based nursing courses in the absence of a state-wide network of ANM training colleges. They then pursue nursing in urban areas and are reluctant to serve in forests and remote villages. In fact, there is a dire need for ANMs in the state, more so in the backward districts. VGKK's experience in the implementation of the ANM programme in resource-poor and remote settings where access to sub-centre itself is difficult, leave alone primary health centre, makes it ideal for VGKK to start a training centre. The first of its kind in the district, the school will also be one of the options for the tribal girls who graduate from our college. Empowering tribal girls as ANMs and making them responsible for the health of their community is one of their goals of this initiative.

ANM training not only offers a suitable career option for educated tribal girls, but also empowers young tribal women to positions of respect and regard within the community. This transforms tribal society and the role of young women within it. VGKK envisions a sustained change in the health status of people in rural and remote areas through a strong health extension programme. Rural women and men will be trained as health workers and posted in small and remote villages where government-employed nurses and doctors are far and few. As these people come from the same area, their sense of responsibility towards their people is higher as is their responsiveness to their problems.

As of 2005, 16 Soliga girls are employed as ANMs and two are studying to be staff nurses. People receive health care at their doorstep. Comprehensive health care is



possible, and the entire society moves towards a good health paradigm. The ANM training school envisions a two-year training programme with 15 girls in each batch. They may then be deputed to a sub-centre which is responsible for the health of about 500-800 people. The VO will continue to facilitate their work and ensure accountability.

This health worker will become an effective health extension in the forests and villages of Karnataka. She will bring government programmes such as child immunisation, tuberculosis, polio eradication and AIDS awareness to the people. She will diffuse knowledge, information and technologies for good health including in the areas of nutrition, hygiene, sanitation, immunisation, community health and local medicine. Good sanitation and hygiene are crucial to community health and this is one of the main causes of illness in rural areas.

With a health worker in every hamlet, there is a potential to promote the consumption of nutritious vegetables at low-cost. Using SHGs and other local organisations effectively for the mass communication of ideas, plans and programmes, the health worker can promote traditional medicinal systems and health care practices which are cost-effective such as growing medicinal plants in temple grounds, kitchen gardens, and fields for use within the family and community. This will be a part of a larger campaign to conserve medicinal plants in the forests.

Education

To help Soliga youth in Chamarajanagar district, VGKK plans to initiate a large number of activities in the field of education over the next few years. These include a Pre-University Science College, a First Grade College in Arts and Commerce, a sports school and finally adoption of Ashrama schools in the district. This covers all the felt gaps in the field of tribal primary and higher education where quality is most important.

As of now, students who want to study science after Grade 10 have to move to urban centres like Mysore, Kollegal or Chamarajanagar as there is no science college elsewhere in the district. VGKK plans to start a PU Science College in the district to help youth and also build up a scientific temper among tribal children. This is especially important as science offers the foundation for excellence in health, agriculture, engineering, basic sciences and other fields.

Sixty Soliga students are currently studying in post-matriculation courses. To help the next generation of children, career counselling is being initiated in the school and pre-university college. This counselling will be augmented by information about courses, colleges, fees and opportunities collected by community organisations like Soliga Abhivruddhi Sangha. There is also an urgent need to find scholarships, sponsorships, bank loans and other sources of funding in addition to proper utilisation of government education schemes for tribal students from impoverished backgrounds.

The exacting and physically arduous lives in the higher altitudes over the centuries has resulted in the development of greater stamina and endurance in tribal people. Tribals have excelled in athletics despite dismal training facilities and lack of teachers. To help





them to realise their full potential in sports, VGKK plans to set up a sports centre in keeping with the guidelines of the Sports Authority of India (SAI) with facilities for coaching in swimming, track events and athletics and other stamina-based games. It is envisioned that the training centre will help them to develop their sports potential.

Livelihood

Job-oriented and vocational training will increase the employment potential of tribal youth and their avenues for employment. This will reduce the pressure on forest resources. Additionally, training in sustainable harvesting methods increase livelihood security through bio-diversity conservation. New techniques in agriculture, organic farming and agroforestry will be implemented to reduce the impact of people on the environment.

In 2004-5, VGKK started watershed management activities at the Boodipadaga Watershed situated in Punajur taluk and Shivapura in Chamarajanagar district. This project will promote sustainable management of water resources for the betterment of the lives and livelihood of the people in the region. Employment is created in the construction of ponds, check dams, trenches, and plantations. Rainwater is retained, harvested and managed for future benefit through bunding and ponds. Sustainable farming techniques like mixed cropping, agro-forestry, agri-horticulture and agri-pasture are introduced to reduce the impact of farming on the land resources. Finally, clean drinking water and sanitation facilities will be developed under this one-year project supported by National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD).

Tourism is on the rise in the region, especially after the death of the dreaded poacher, Veerappan. This sector, if properly regulated, has immense potential to increase awareness about our environment and to foster a spirit of conservation among all the urbanites. It is important to evolve a model of eco-tourism which involves the tribals. A comprehensive conservation education policy has been evolved which includes people living within the forests as well as tourists. Capacity-building of Soligas as eco-guides and interactions with tribal elders to give the tourists an idea of the tribal way of life are a part of the programme. Such an inclusive model of tourism serves as a livelihood option and gives due credibility to the traditional knowledge of the tribals. In addition, it blends conservation education along with tourism, which is the need of the hour.

Biodiversity conservation

The BRT Wildlife Sanctuary is home to a variety of flora and fauna. Development initiatives and policies for tribal development have to take into account this invaluable biodiversity. However, the livelihood security and the neglected rights of the people are just as important. VGKK has a commitment to evolve a rational and just policy of biodiversity conservation that incorporates the interests of the forests and its people. Livelihood security and participatory approach to conservation are key issues.

With more and more Soligas opting for modern education, abandoning their 'wild'





living, the Soliga youth do not respect their traditional knowledge, as much as their predecessors did. This is quite evident in the fact that the elder Soligas are more knowledgeable about their forests than the youth. Not only is there an urgent need to document this rich tribal lore, songs, local names for their birds, plants, wildlife, but there is also a felt need to put it in its right place – on par with 'textbook' knowledge, or sometimes even higher. Suitable strategies to incorporate their traditional knowledge in conservation practices are needed to prevent the ravages of development from harming the fragile eco-system that this sanctuary harbours. Many aspects of bird behaviour, nesting and feeding that are learnt from them may also be helpful for conservation of species in other areas.

There exists a wealth of information, lessons and best practices in sustainable resource management, based on experiences in the field. These need to be documented and shared for wider use and sensitisation. Finally, it is important to understand the interrelationships between tribal economy, ecology and culture. A threat to any one constitutes a threat to all. The tribals themselves, who are indigenous to these regions, can best preserve the balance, and it is for the rest of the world to respect, learn and lend suitable support where necessary. Lobbying at various levels with the Forest Department and the administration towards keeping these issues central to policy-making will be an important component of our approach.

Comprehensive socio-economic policy for the district – evolution and implementation

The district of ChamaraJanagar has a significant tribal population with a large percentage of them located in remote forest areas. An integrated approach to development with inter-sectoral coordination between the relevant government departments – health and family welfare, education, rural development, and others is the need of the hour. The learnings in the 25 years of tribal development of VGKK are being used to develop a comprehensive socio-economic development package for the tribal population of ChamaraJanagar with strong inter-sectoral coordination being central to the proposal. Development processes inimical to the interests of the wildlife sanctuary and its people, like quarrying and mining will be strongly opposed.

A major criticism of the VO approach has been that many of the interventions, although innovative and effective, are not sustainable. Strengthening of self-help groups in numbers and capacity is a significant step in sustainability. Capacity-building of SHGs in appropriate technologies, book-keeping, marketing and enterprise development is the goal of the initiative. A self-reliant tribal society is one of the key components of the vision statement of VGKK. The Tribal Co-operative and Marketing Development Federation Limited (TRIFED), Ministry of Tribal Affairs has come forward to support this initiative. Various other issues like food security, organic farming, development of seed banks, health insurance and propagation of herbal gardens will be initiated through SHGs.



The VGKK Family

In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit.

— Albert Schweitzer

For the first decade, the small VGKK team had very exciting and interesting times. Multi-skilled and fulfilling multiple responsibilities as social workers, dramatists, activists, teachers and health workers, each staff member adopted a few podus and looked into all aspects of development there – health, curative health, MCH, education, etc. With a vast geographical area to cover in the two fields of health and education, it was impossible to find and employ enough people to do all the things that needed to be done. Grassroots development sometimes meant actually clearing out grass, roots, cow dung and children's mess. The skeleton staff rose to the challenge.

They had to resort to a range of tactics to entice people to seek services in health and education. Singing in the podu, one-to-one counselling, street theatre with school children as actors were all used. All these activities made it easier for the people to accept new ideas. Slowly, the confidence and trust of the tribal people in the hospital and school staff grew. They started waiting for the doctor's weekly rounds and even visiting him in his hospital for treatment. They also started sending their children to school regularly. In time, the Soligas graduating from the school were trained as health workers.

In the course of bringing awareness about injustice, the social workers at VGKK invariably rubbed against those in power, in some cases it was tribal elders, in others outsiders. When a young social worker was asked to present himself at a nyaya (justice) panchayat and answer for his actions, H.N. Somasundaram went in his stead. He was able to explain the situation to the elders and cool their anger. His age and cool demeanour succeeded where younger hotter heads would have failed. At other times, it took a lot more than just one meeting. For example, when the Soligas in Purani podu got into trouble for beating up the ACF in the course of an altercation over land issues, they ran away into the forest leaving only the very young and very old in the podu. Repeated meetings with the forest officials and the police did not yield any results. The Soligas continued to live in hiding. The VGKK elders then met DCF Srinivas who arranged for a peace meeting. Out of nowhere, 40-50 tribals materialised for the meeting and an agreement was reached.

Encounters with elephants, wild boars, bears, bisons, deer and snakes were fairly common as the social workers criss-crossed the forest in the course of their work. Elephants would sometimes wander into the current campus enroute to Somasundaram here.



Walking several kilometres to reach the podus or work sites, skipping meals, sharing the meagre food of the Soliga families – all this was packed in a day's work for these intrepid social workers. Sometimes, they would go to bed with just a cup of black coffee. At other times, the forest provided their daily wants – ripe and raw mangoes, jackfruits, oranges, gooseberries. On rare occasions, they were treated to sumptuous meals by generous supporters. Encounters with elephants, wild boars, bears, bison, deer and snakes were fairly common as the social workers criss-crossed the forest in the course of their work. Old timers recall that even 15 years back, elephants would sometimes wander into the current campus enroute to Somarasana kere.

Stories of how VGKK found people and how people found VGKK makes for interesting reading. Friends, well-wishers, admirers and staff recommended and brought onboard one-by-one, a large number of committed and hardworking people. The mobile medical unit and the community organisation were also effective vehicles to spread awareness about VGKK.

H. Ramachar, a fiery young man of 20, spoke about his vision of primary education at a function at the JSS College in Chamarajanagar. G.S. Jayadeva who heard him recommended that he join VGKK and in 1984, he joined as a laboratory technician before becoming a science teacher much loved by the students for his skills as a storyteller. Today, he is the manager of VGKK projects in B.R. Hills. Mallesh, a young man studying SSLC, met Dr Sudarshan, who then supported him in his education. After completing his education, he came back to work with VGKK. He worked in a variety of positions from general helper to community organiser to coordinator. He has now moved on to work with other organisations.

Puttanna, a Soliga youth from Kollegal, had just finished his matriculation when he met Sheena Shetty and Krishna Moolya, the charismatic social workers who were organising the Soligas in Kollegal. He wanted to do similar work and joined VGKK in 1985, working first as a social worker, activist and then as a teacher in the primary school. He remembers the good old days when everyone did everything and the VGKK family was very close knit. Doddaiiah, a Soliga from Kollegal, worked with the Sanghas for 10 years in his hamlet. He feels a close connection to VGKK even after his

retirement. His family continues to contribute through Siddamma, his daughter, who is an efficient ANM at the base hospital in B.R. Hills.

Muthamma, a Jenu Kuruba woman, was efficiency personified during her period in VGKK. She worked simultaneously in several fields including MCH, community organisation and the nursery school. She was as passionate about street theatre and puppet shows as she was about feeding, watering and keeping the nursery children clean.

Walking several kilometres to reach the podus or work sites, skipping meals, sharing the meagre food of the Soliga families – all this was packed in a day's work for these intrepid social workers. Sometimes, they would go to bed with just a cup of black coffee. At other times, the forest provided their daily wants – ripe and raw mangoes, jackfruits, oranges, gooseberries. On rare occasions, they were treated to sumptuous meals by generous supporters.



Everybody taught, cooked, cleaned and worked in the office, fields, hostels, construction sites, and podus. More people joined VGKK, drawn by dreams of social service, drawn by the innocence of the tribals, the enchantment of the forests, and their own notions of truth and justice. For many of them, there was no going back. B.R. Hills became home. Each team member served in any capacity she/he could and sometimes, in more ways than one.

Sidduriah who joined as the secretary of the dairy to take care of 20 cows, soon became storekeeper and then hostel warden. He moved on to maintain the VGKK fair price shop in the hills, and is today the accountant of VGKK, serving not merely as the money manager, but also as a repository of the financial history of VGKK. Shankarappa, Shamanna, Nagaraj, Venkatesh and Ramalingam have delivered valuable service to VGKK.

Many left and returned, like Satyanarayana Hegde, who left after 10 years with VGKK, and then returned 8 years later to manage an Integrated Learning Project. Others started their own organisations taking the vision and mission of VGKK further in ways the founders never imagined. Some of them are:

1. Dr Mahesh, Dudi Trust, Gundlupet
2. G.S. Jayadeva, Deenabandu Trust, Chamarajanagar
3. Shivaraje Gowda, Krupa, Kanakapura
4. Shamanna, Samanvaya, Marahalli
5. Singri Gowda, Samasti, Krishna Raja Pete
6. Krishna Moulya/Sheena Shetty, Jana Shikshana Seva Trust, Mangalore
7. C. Rajanna, Narendra Foundation, Tumkur
8. Uma Shankar Periodi, Azim Premji Foundation, Bangalore
9. Dr P.D. Vinayak, P. Subramanya Setty and Lakshmi Bai Trust (R), Bellary

Professionals in the hills

Meanwhile, many young doctors who did a part of their internship at B.R. Hills imbibed the true meaning and spirit of service and ethics, and have benefited immensely from their experience here. B.B. Prakash, a Bangalore-based architect, spent a long time studying and documenting indigenous knowledge with respect to tribal housing, design and local materials.

Shashikala, a history lecturer in Maharani's College in Mysore, read about VGKK in the newspaper. She brought her students here for an NSS camp and that was the start of her association with the organisation. Her insights into the field of education are even today being used in VGHPs and VGHS. She also helped to set up the college, taught songs and lessons to the children. Her sister Dr Roopa came as a house surgeon and did not go back after 2 weeks. She stayed on for 6 months and returned whenever possible. Dr Vinay, a surgeon, contributed 5 years to consolidate the Jayavijayam hospital in B.R. Hills. Dr Jyothi, an anaesthetist, spent more than 2 years at the hospital. Dr Raghavendra and Dr Manjunath and Dr G. Vasudeva Rao worked for a couple of years each, before moving elsewhere.

Meanwhile, many young doctors who did a part of their internship at B.R. Hills imbibed the true meaning and spirit of service and ethics, and have benefited immensely from their experience here.



Current Staff of VGPK (in alphabetical order)

Health Team			
1. Basappa B.	29. Kantha Raju	60. Srinivas K.	
2. Bommalah C.	30. Kathagowda	61. Sumitra C.M.	
3. Dr. Girja Devi V.	31. Krishnakumar	62. Sunderesh B.K.	
4. Dr. Guruprasad B.V.	32. Krishnappa	63. Suresh	
5. Dr. Prashanth N.S.	33. Lingaraju	64. Veerabhadraswamy P.	
6. Ketha G.	34. Madanna	65. Varuki B.K.	
7. Mahadeviah M.	35. Madesh	66. Vijay K.	
8. Murugash	36. K. Mahadevi		
9. Nanje Gowda C.M.	37. Mahadevamma	Social Work Team	
10. Prakash Rao Y.A.	38. Mahadevaswamy B.	67. Doneraju	
11. Puttaswammamma	39. Mariappa	68. Mahadeva D.	
12. Siddamma D.	40. Muthiah V.	69. Rangegowda K.	
13. Suresh N.	41. Nagaraju	70. Samarasangi	
14. Swamy V.	42. Nagaraju	71. Shivamallappa	
15. Vijay Kumar V.	43. Nagesh	72. Shivamallu	
16. Vinay Kumar K.S.	44. Pandegowda	73. Shivarame Gowda	
Education Team		74. Ullas	
17. Basavaraju	45. Pappiah		
18. Bellappa	46. Prabhakar	Production and training team	
19. Chikkanna	47. Pramesh	75. Ananda	
20. Doddasubbiah	48. Putanna	76. Govinda	
21. Ganesha	49. Puttaswamy	77. Mutha	
22. C. Geetha	50. H. Ramachar	78. Naja	
23. Geeta	51. Rangaswamy C.	79. Vinay Yadav	
24. Girijadevi	52. Rukmangala N.S.		
25. Hitalamani S.D.	53. S. Chakravarthy	Finance Team	
26. Huchchiah R.	54. S. Ramachandra	80. Greshkumar M.	
27. Jagadish	55. Sacha	81. Jademalla M.	
28. Jagadish	56. Shivanis	82. Sidduriah	
	57. Siddappa S.	83. Vithwanath Shastri	
	58. Sowmya		
	59. Srinivasa Y.N.		

Our auditor G.N. Ananthavardhana has been with us since the very beginning. Based in Mysore, he has been diligently auditing all our finances and ensuring that the accounts are maintained as per the norms. The entire team comes to B.R. Hills once a year and temperatures rise as they audit accounts to meet their high standards of book-keeping. Sham Bhat, our legal advisor, is also based in Mysore. Dr Kishore Kumar G.V., presently an associate professor of psychiatry at NIMHANS, Bangalore, was introduced to us by Dr R. Srinivas Murthy. Dr Kishore continues to visit B.R. Hills regularly since 1995 to support our efforts in mental health care. He went on to work with us closely to develop a syllabus and textbooks for life skills education for the children in VGHPs and VGHS. Teacher training and counselling for students were also his forte.

Artisans like stone cutter Madaiah and Seena were crucial to the vast proportion of stone work which has been done as the organisation grew. Similarly, Puttaswamachar and his brother Nanjundaswamy were the skilled carpenters who built our houses, dormitories and houses. Puttaswamachar's sons, Suresh and Mahesh, continue to take the tradition forward - Suresh as the Kannada teacher, and Mahesh as the new carpenter.



I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.

— Albert Schweitzer

First generation staff: Some people have spent over 20 years of their lives with us. We give them a paragraph each to acknowledge their contribution.

S. Chakravarty: A hereditary *palpothegar* in the temple at the Biligiri Ranganatha Swamy temple, Chakravarty was the 'local' man who facilitated Dr Sudarshan's work in B.R. Hills. He has been a part of the team since the first day. Currently, his official position is Headmaster of the Vivekananda Girijana Higher Primary School, but this forms only a small part of his actual day at VGKK. He steps into any management void that exists to ensure that VGKK functions smoothly. A people's person, he is sought after for his personal touch and care.

H. Ramachar: A science teacher by vocation, Ramachar is the current coordinator of VGKK. Quick thinking and fast-talking, he enthralled his audience with tales drawn from a variety of sources. He is successful in trouble-shooting operations, simply because he retains his sense of humour even in the most stressful situations. A can-do attitude like his is an asset to any organisation. His biggest regret is that the rest of the world lacks his zest for learning!

Puttanna: The young man who joined VGKK after finishing his schooling has grown into a well-loved primary school teacher. He is loved not only by the students, but also the community. His children now attend school here. His hobby is drawing and the hills offer him endless inspiration. VGKK has benefited as much from his art, as by his teaching.

Sumitra: When the headmaster of the primary school is busy contributing to VGKK in other ways, it is Sumitra who holds the reins of the school with a firm hand. Easy-going and strict as required, she commands respect in children of all ages. Whether they are 3 feet tall or 6, they all behave themselves when she is in sight!

Siddurajiah: An accountant by dint of hard work, he takes care to ensure that not a single paise of donor money is unaccounted. Irrespective of whether the amount is Rs 60 or Rs 6 lakh, every contribution is acknowledged with a receipt and a covering letter. He is aware of how much it costs to feed a child, an adult or a cow per day!

Siddegowda: Siddegowda joined VGKK as a cook in 1984 and continues to dish up three nutritious meals every day since then. Several generations of children have grown up eating his ragi balls, lentil soups and vegetables. On Sundays, the community kitchen serves a special sweet dessert.

Former staff of VGKK

No history will be complete without acknowledging the contributions of those who have



Former staff of VGKK					
Health Team					
1.	Dr. Mahesh	28.	Rangaswamy Y.R.	56.	V. Joshi
2.	Dr. Nagaraju	29.	Sridhar Hegde	57.	Venkatesh Pacharavali
3.	Dr. Roopa	30.	V. Sudarshan		
4.	Dr. Suresh Ullat			Training and Production Team	
5.	Dr. V.S. Sridharan	Community Organisation Team		58.	Jayakumar
6.	Dr. Venkatesh Rao	31.	C. Madegowda	59.	Madhavarathar
7.	Dr. Vinay Taunk	32.	C. Raju	60.	Patra
8.	Dr. Vinod Kumar	33.	Chandrasekhar	61.	Purushotham
9.	Kam. Jaganath	34.	Chandrasekhar Hegde	62.	Radhakrishna
10.	Mary R.	35.	D.M. Mahadevaswamy	63.	Ramalingam
11.	Praveen G. Bhat	36.	Dorsi	64.	Ramula
		37.	Gayatri	65.	Shanthala Hegde
		38.	Indrani	66.	Venkatesh
		39.	K.R. Chandrasekhar		
Education Team		40.	Kalappa	Finance Team	
12.	Basavaraju	41.	Krishna Moolys	67.	Prasanna Kumara
13.	Bedagowda	42.	Leena	68.	Srinath Rao
14.	Davis Nalika	43.	Maheshmurti		
15.	Gayatri	44.	Malikarjuna	Volunteers	
16.	Gowthama	45.	Purnanaga	69.	Gurudutt
17.	Jamasheer	46.	Shamanna	70.	Swami
18.	Lokesha	47.	Sheena Shetty		Swajambodhanandaj
19.	Mahadev's Swamy	48.	Shivanna Gowda	71.	G.V. Kibe
20.	Muthamma	49.	Siddu	72.	Uma Rao
21.	Merunda Nalika	50.	Singgowda	73.	Swami Paramendaj
22.	Prabhavathi	51.	T.S. Neela	74.	Rajeshwari
23.	Prasanna Kumar	52.	Udaya Kumar	75.	Kohore Attavar
24.	Puzzamallamma	53.	Uma Devi	76.	Jagdish, a painter
25.	R.V. Kibe	54.	Uma Shankar Periyodi	77.	Praveer Borgankar
26.	Ramesh	55.	Uma Rao		
27.	Ranga Hanumanth				

left us to find their own space elsewhere. These people worked with us for periods varying from 2 to 20 years. Some of them will never be forgotten.

Shri Gurudutt: A devotee of Ramakrishna Ashrama, he was with VGKK from its second year of operation. He was in charge of the accounts section. His simplicity, honesty and sparse lifestyle were an example to all who joined him. He also trained Siddurajiah and Mahadev Swamy in book-keeping and accounting. To this day, his work carries on.

Dr. Vinay Taunk: A gifted surgeon and a kind-hearted man, Dr. Vinay spent over 6 years in VGKK and has operated on many tribal people. A very disciplined surgeon, he handled very difficult surgeries – endoscopy, laparoscopy and various other general surgery cases. Though trained as a surgeon, he handled everything from the simplest cold to complex surgeries. He regularly put in time with the mobile unit and at the PHC in Gumbali. School health checkups were regularly carried out and he was on call 24/7.

Dr V.S. Sridharan: Inspired by the philosophy of J. Krishnamurthy, Dr V.S. Sridharan, a paediatrician by training from Madras Medical College joined VGKK in 1991. A brilliant



.....
clinician, he has been able to put his extensive capacities to good use in B.R. Hills in a range of specialties like paediatrics, tuberculosis, minor surgeries and psychiatry. His main contribution has been towards strengthening the medical record systems which are now being computerised for further efficiency. Evidence based medicine and rational drug use policy were other systems that he put in place along with Dr Sudarshan. He is, however, best known for his love and compassion for patients and his soft-spoken kind nature.

Venkata Narayana Chakuri: In the short span of 4 years that he spent with VGKK, Venkat proved that he was one of those rare development workers who are well-versed in both theory and practice. He came to VGKK from Vivekananda Kendra and was well respected and liked by the workers and the board of directors for his commitment and work ethic. His strengths lie in community organization, training programmes, dissemination of rural technology and innovative ideas.

Swami Swayambodhananda: An electrical engineer by qualification, he met Dr Sudarshan at the Ramakrishna Mission in Bangalore in the late 1960s. In the year 1989, he came to help Dr Sudarshan in B.R. Hills. He coached the first batch of high school students including Jadeya, C. Mada, S. Ramachandra and others in Physics and Mathematics. The fledgling VGKK campus greatly benefited from his expertise in electrical wiring. Though he moved on to the Himalayas to continue his Sadhana, his extended family continues to support VGKK as volunteers.

Financial Resources

No history of VGKK is complete without an acknowledgement of those who supported us financially. The story started in 1982 with land donated by A.N. Yellappa Reddy, a Deputy Conservator in the Forest Department. G.S. Jayadeva donated Rs 200 each month to buy medicines and supplies, while Huchche Gowda and his friends in Chamarajanagar helped by donating drugs, bread for patients and doctors, and whatever else they urgently needed. The same year, the Ramakrishna Ashram in Mysore started supporting the fledgling VO with medicines, clothes, fruits and vegetables. Mr. Gurumurthy Reddy of Hotel Bhimas, Bangalore has consistently supported VGKK in many ways.

When Vijayam Krishnamoorthy wanted to donate money to build the hospital, the

We owe a special note of thanks to people who have contributed in small but consistent ways. They have inspired us to work harder each day.

- ⇒ A government official working in Vidhana Soudha sends VGKK Rs 60 every month without fail by money order.
 - ⇒ A postmaster Mrs R. Bagavathi sent Rs 100 every month, with Rs 150 on special occasions until her retirement. She started contributing when she was working in Chamarajanagar and continued to do so even after she moved to Chennai.
 - ⇒ A Swiss national sends 100 Swiss Francs every month for over a decade.
 - ⇒ Children studying in a school in Channarayana contributed small sums each and donated the total amount to VGKK when they visited B.R. Hills.
-



Ramakrishna Ashrama graciously agreed to receive the amount for building the hospital. This allowed the funds to be exempt from tax as VGKK had not yet received tax exemption for its work. Saraswati didi, Swami Swayambodhanandha, R.V. Kibe and Vijaykumar Maharaj were others from the Ramakrishna Mission who helped VGKK. Purnananda Swami, an old monk from Northern India, heard of our work in B.R. Hills and offered his services. He was over 70 years young when he came here!

The Christian Children's Fund also came in 1982, with large-scale support for children's nutrition and education programmes. The sponsorship programme was alone

Current donors:

1. American Service To India (ASTI), Washington DC, USA
 2. India Friends Association (IFA), USA
 3. Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART)
 4. Government of India
 5. Government of Karnataka
 6. Sapraja Foundation, Hong Kong
 7. Tribal Co-Operative and Marketing Development Federation Ltd. (TRIFED)
-

responsible for ensuring that so many Soliga children went to school. The scheme also provided employment for others who had to stitch clothes for Christmas, uniforms for children in three districts - Kollegal, Chamarajanagar and Yelandur. When the first generation of students had passed out of school, such monetary motivations were phased out and the sponsorship programme was stopped. The funds from the sponsorship programme also supported the vocational training and alternative livelihoods programme for the Soligas.

The government of Karnataka started supporting VGKK very early. From 1982-1993,

the government sanctioned grant-in-aid for the school and a recurring grant for the hostel. Additionally, ITDP supports 50 students with grants for education. ITDP also donated an old van for use as the mobile. In 1984-85, the taluk board provided fisheries training and the District Industries and Commerce provided houses for the trainees. From 2004, the government of Karnataka supports the nutrition programme for an additional 50 students. They have also supported the new hospital building through the health and family welfare department with a grant of Rs 24 lakh. Other donors offered additional funds to complete this building.

In 1983, an MCH programme started in B.R. Hills with Christian Relief Services (CRS) support and balgar, milk powder and oil were given to mothers for the next 6-7 years in an effort to improve their nutrition. This was an integral part of VGKK's efforts at improving the health and well-being of Soliga mothers and children.

Dr Arun Kumar, a field officer at the Indian Overseas Bank, Kagalwadi Branch, was very keen to help tribals. Under a one-cow-per-family scheme 150 cows were given to Soligas in B.R. Hills in 1983. The cows were purchased in Bannur in Mandya district and a total of 200 litres of milk was produced for sale each day. This activity brought milk and milk products to tribal children who would otherwise never be able to afford it.

In 1983, HIVOS came in with funds for recurring expenses in the areas of health,



Institutional and Individual Donors

Institutional donors

1. Asha for Education, California, USA.
2. Asha LA, California, USA.
3. Association for Indians Development, USA
4. Christian Children's Fund Inc., Bangalore
5. Evangelische Zentralstelle für Entwicklungshilfe E.V., (EZE) Germany
6. Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions, Bangalore.
7. HIVOS, Holland
8. Indians for Collective Action, USA.
9. Kannada Koota, Illinois Vidyaranya Chapter.
10. Maharashtra Foundation, Newark, USA.
11. Micro Lab Limited, Bangalore
12. Sarah Hall, Find Your Feet, London Seloos, UK.
13. St. Anne's Girls High School, Channarayana
14. The Ramakrishna Vedantha Society, New York, USA.
15. University of Boston Foundation Inc., USA
16. Venkateshwara Temple, Pittsburgh, USA

Individual donors

1. Amulya Gopikrishna, Bangalore
2. Annata C.R., Germany
3. Arathi Basin, Mumbai.
4. Arundathi V. Shenoy and Bharmy Shenoy, USA.
5. Arvind Halliyal, USA
6. Charles Seargan, Germany.
7. Christian Kruger, Switzerland
8. Deborah Laderman, USA.
9. Dr Manjunath and Friends, USA
10. Dr. Benny Torres, Jerusalem, Israel
11. Dr. C.K. Hiranya, USA
12. Dr. G.K. Surya Prakash, USA
13. Dr. M.L. Ramesh, USA.
14. Frieda Bashard, Switzerland.
15. Gubbi Huchappa and Family, Tumkur.
16. H.R. Dasharthan, Bangalore.
17. H.S. Rao and Meera Rao, USA
18. Hanumuk Bandha, USA.

19. Helge M. Schmidt, Germany.
20. Jagannath Babu and R Kalyana Jagadish, USA
21. Jennifer Marrow, USA
22. Joseph Alancope, USA
23. K.M.M. Raja, Bangalore
24. Kamaljit Bawa, Bangalore
25. Kuldeep Kown, USA
26. Lene Kristen, Switzerland
27. M. Subbalakshmi Krishnaswamy, Bombay.
28. M.N. Nonds Kumar, Bangalore.
29. M.N. Prabhakar, Bombay.
30. Mandhoir Nothiran Nelwani, Hong Kong
31. Meera, France.
32. N. Prabhakar, Bangalore
33. N.C. Raghuram, Singapore
34. Nandan Krani, Bangalore
35. Nikki Gehenny, Switzerland
36. Padmanaba Rao, Mangalore
37. Parhal Dev, Bangalore
38. Rajamannar Abhay, USA.
39. Ramana Nanda, USA
40. Ramprasad J Sethur and Veena V Sedhur, USA.
41. Regula Gehering, Switzerland
42. Rev. Swami Abhinandaji, Singapore
43. Rita K. Jengiani, USA
44. Rohini K. Srihari Sengar, USA
45. Rohini Murthy, Bangalore.
46. Rose Pal, USA
47. S. Walter, West Germany.
48. S.D. Shabi, Bangalore
49. Sagi S'Raju, USA
50. Shreenatha Mysore, Narayana Arathi, Varadhachar, USA
51. Srikrishna Bharme, USA.
52. Sudha N Murthy, Bangalore
53. Suguna Srinivasa, Bangalore
54. Veetomohan, France.
55. Venkataraman Dharmarajan, USA.
56. Vimal Govinda Madiwal, Yelburga
57. William KD Keefee, USA
58. William M Keefee Ely, USA
59. Yonesh, Nakagaw (Japan)



education and community organization. The early school building, the cow shed, sericulture-rearing house were all built with the support of HIVOS. Experiments in low cost housing were also conducted in the course of this construction. In Bandipur and M.M. Hills, HIVOS has donated a mobile for health care, and some funds for community organisation.

Dr M.L. Ramesh, an NRI, supported VGKK with funds for use in health and infrastructure projects. He also helped in networking and fund raising among NRIs and American donors through ASTI.

The German donor organisation Evangelische Zentralstelle für Entwicklungshilfe E.V. (EZE) introduced to us by Kirtee Shaw has supported the infrastructure development from 1990 to 1997. The school, prayer hall, staff quarters, eight dormitories and one guest house on the campus were constructed with the support of EZE. They also supported the tribal housing program in three districts jointly with the Government of Karnataka. A total of 750 houses in Kollegal, Chamarajanagar, Yelandur, Gundlupet, Nanjangud, and H.D. Kote were built under this programme.

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs of the Government of India has been supporting 150 hostelites and 180 students from 1993 to 2005. The operation theatre and staff quarters were also constructed with the support of the Government of India. Two architects Kirtee Shaw and Amulya Gopi Krishna have helped us to design the buildings in a suitable manner.

The government has been one of the main sources of funding both directly and

Collaborations and networking

VGKK would like to record its appreciation for the fruitful collaboration with the following voluntary organisations in various programmes past and present.

1. Karuna Trust
2. Vivekananda Foundation
3. Community Health Cell – Sochara
4. Rejuvenate India Movement
5. Arogya Raksha Yojana Trust
6. Green Foundation

State-level organisations:

1. Tribal Joint Action
2. FEVORD-K
3. Voluntary Health Association-Karnataka (VHA-K)

National-level organisations:

1. Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI)
2. Voluntary Associations Network of India (VANI)

International organisations:

1. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
 2. United Nations (UNICEF)
 3. World Health Organisation (WHO)
-



indirectly. VGKK takes great pride in the fact that Soliga tribals were able to avail of the various schemes that the government offers for the benefit of the marginalised people. Benefits which never reach the intended beneficiaries are not effective. Corruption, top-down decision-making, welfare approach and distance from the grassroots are all responsible for the ineffectivity of the programmes. By simply ensuring that the programmes and the beneficiaries were in tune with each other, VGKK has been instrumental in helping several tribal families. Several IAS officers supported us in our work including Sudhir Kumar, V.P. Baligar, Madanagopal, Vijayabhaskar, M.R. Srinivas Murthy, Gautam Basu, Harsha Gupta and S.V. Ranganath. We are also grateful for the support and encouragement of IFS officers DFO Srinivas and Belappa.

Awards and felicitations

There is yet another group of people without whom our work would never have reached out from B.R. Hills to the world. They are the people who have seen fit to critically acclaim the work of our organisation and the vision of our founders, especially Dr H. Sudarshan. Some of the awards and honours we have received over the years are presented below.

1. 1984 Rajyotsava State Award, Government of Karnataka (For social work)
2. 1991 Vivekananda Seva Puraskar, (National Award). Belur Math, Ramakrishna Mission
3. 1992 Environment Award, Government of Karnataka
4. 1992 Dr B. R. Ambedkar Centenary Award, Government of Karnataka
5. 1994 Karnataka State Award, Government of Karnataka (VGKK - Best Child Welfare Organisation)
6. 1994 Right Livelihood Award (Alternate Nobel Prize), Sweden
7. 1995 International Distinguished Physician by American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin, USA
8. 1995 Dr Pinnamaneni and Seethadevi Foundation Award (for excellence in social work).
9. 1997 Karnataka Jyothi Award, Government of Karnataka
10. 1999 Basava Shree Award
11. 2000 Padmashree Award by President of India
12. 2001 Human Rights Award
13. 2001 Mahaveer Award
14. 2002 Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar Award, Government of Karnataka (VGKK)
15. 2002 Krishnadevaraya Award
16. 2003 Devaraj Urs Award by Government of Karnataka
17. 2004 Vivekananda Medal by Ramakrishna Mission, Kolkata



List of VGKK Presidents

Cheluvadi Madegowda, Yerkangadde – 1981-1988

As the name Cheluvadi implies, he was a tribal leader and a dynamic person. He was the head of LAMPS and a representative of the Soligas at the Yelandur taluk board. He was a strong leader who fought for tribal land, better wages and made tribals aware of their exploitation.

Konure Gowda, Kanneri Colony – 1989-1999

He was also a traditional leader of the Soligas, a LAMPS director and LAMPS agent collecting and transporting forest produce to the LAMPS offices. He was a gram panchayat member and is now a GP president. At 65, he is still an active participant in the fight for tribal rights and was on the streets of Chamarajanagar demanding that the government lift the ban on NTFPs.

J. Bommaiah, Banglepodu – 1999-2001

Bommaiah started his life as a young field worker with CCF, which was then administered by VGKK. He is a natural leader with his easy-going nature and quick action. He has maintained good relationships with government officials and continues to fight for the rights of tribals, despite being employed with the government.

Shivane Gowda, Hospodu – 2001-2004

A compatriot of Cheluvadi Made Gowda, he was a farmer and a priest. As a member of the board, he impressed everyone with his straightforwardness, simplicity and lack of political ambition. When Bommaiah resigned after getting a government job, he was chosen as the director because of his honesty, humility and guilelessness.

M. Jade Gowda, Hospodu – 2004-2005

As the only Soliga with a doctoral degree, Jade Gowda is the natural choice as a forward-looking leader. His special areas of interest include education, higher education, and agricultural activities. He has worked in various capacities at VGKK since he was a young boy and continues to do so as the director of the board.



BOARD OF DIRECTORS

1981-1983

Cheluvadi Made Gowda - President
 Dr. H. Sudarshan - Honorary
 Secretary
 G.S. Jayadeva - Treasurer
 Made Gowda - Member
 Dodda Nanje Gowda - Member
 Bedi Nanje Gowda - Member
 Jadeya B. - Member
 Pande Gowda - Member
 Nanje Gowda - Member

1984-1985

Cheluvadi Made Gowda
 Dr. H. Sudarshan
 G.S. Jayadeva
 Pande Gowda
 Dodda Nanje Gowda
 Bedi Nanje Gowda
 Scentyenne Made Gowda
 Jade Gowda B.
 Range Gowda

1985-1986

Cheluvadi Made Gowda
 Dr. H. Sudarshan
 G.S. Jayadeva
 Made Gowda
 Pande Gowda
 Jadeya B.
 C. Konure Gowda
 Mullahandi Range Gowda
 Halage Gowda

1986-1987

Cheluvadi Made Gowda
 Dr. H. Sudarshan
 G.S. Jayadev
 Made Gowda
 Pande Gowda
 Jadeya B.
 C. Konure Gowda
 Mullahandi Range Gowda
 Halage Gowda

1987-1989

Cheluvadi Made Gowda
 Dr. H. Sudarshan
 G.S. Jayadeva
 Sidde Gowda
 C. Konure Gowda
 Dodda Vere Gowda
 Jadeya B.
 N. Range Gowda
 Junje Gowda

1989-1993

C. Konure Gowda - President
 Sidde Gowda - Vice President
 Dr. H. Sudarshan - Honorary
 Secretary
 H.N. Somasundaram - Treasurer
 Jade Gowda, Purani
 N. Range Gowda
 Dodda Vere Gowda
 Junje Gowda

1993-1996

C. Konure Gowda - President
 Cheluvadi Made Gowda -
 Vice President
 Dr. H. Sudarshan - Honorary
 secretary
 H.N. Somasundaram
 Purani Jadeya
 Shivane Gowda
 Parvathamma

1996-1999

C. Konure Gowda - President
 Cheluvadi Made Gowda - Vice
 President
 Dr. H. Sudarshan - Honorary
 Secretary
 H.N. Somasundaram
 Shivane Gowda
 Jade Gowda
 Kethamma

1999-2001

J. Bommaliah -
 President
 Dr. H. Sudarshan
 H.N. Somasundaram
 C. Konure Gowda
 Shivane Gowda

2001-2002

J. Bommaliah -
 President
 Dr. H. Sudarshan -
 Honorary Secretary
 H.N. Somasundaram
 Konure Gowda
 Shivane Gowda
 Kethamma
 G. Malleshappa
 Dr. V. Shridaran
 Puttanna

2002-2004

Shivane Gowda -
 President
 J. Bommaliah -
 Vice President
 Dr. H. Sudarshan
 H.N. Somasundaram
 Konure Gowda
 G. Malleshappa
 Puttanna
 Dr. V. Shridaran
 H. Ramachar

2004-2005

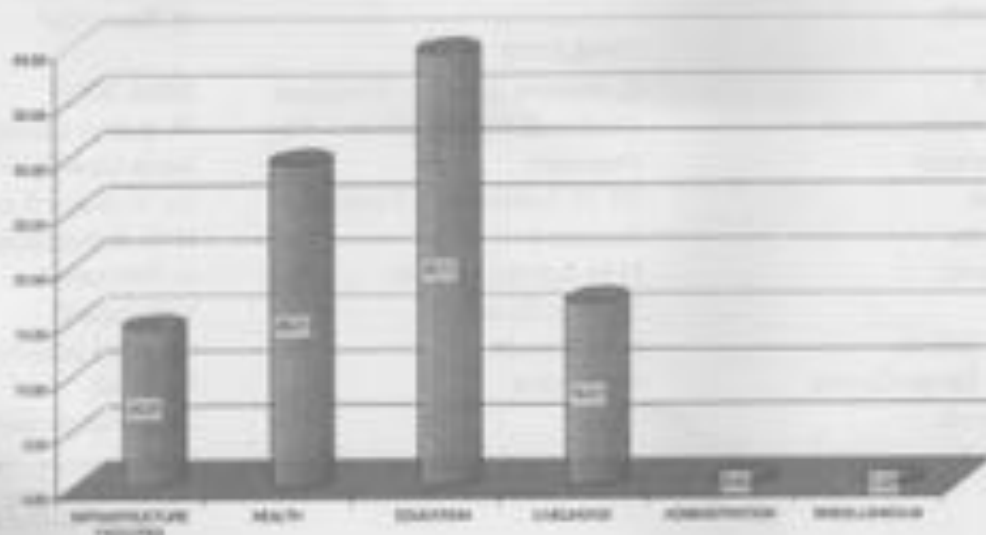
M. Jadeya Gowda
 Sidde Gowda
 Dr. H. Sudarshan
 H.N. Somasundaram
 H. Ramachar
 Vishwanath
 Gayathri Jadeyappa
 Puttanna
 Sanna Range Gowda



ACCOUNTS FOR THE PERIOD 1981 TO 2005

PERIOD	INCOME	AMOUNT	EXPENDITURE	AMOUNT
1980 - 1981	To O/Bal	Nil		
1981 - 1982	To Receipt	12,953	Capital Expenses	
1982 - 1983	**	1,05,951	A. Infrastructure	1,84,45,235
1983 - 1984	**	8,38,046		
1984 - 1985	**	12,94,761	Recurring Expenses	
1985 - 1986	**	10,08,914	A. Health	3,77,43,503
1986 - 1987	**	14,67,799		
1987 - 1988	**	15,08,804	B. Education	5,07,90,628
1988 - 1989	**	24,14,719		
1989 - 1990	**	25,62,163	C. Livelihood	2,14,63,043
1990 - 1991	**	39,70,745		
1991 - 1992	**	40,03,429	D. Administration	5,16,870
1992 - 1993	**	5,34,52,93		
1993 - 1994	**	63,26,344	E. Miscellaneous	2,58,435
1994 - 1995	**	77,29,138		
1995 - 1996	**	71,06,441		
1996 - 1997	**	1,05,64,957		
1997 - 1998	**	67,09,730		
1998 - 1999	**	81,44,728		
1999 - 2000	**	1,20,86,674		
2000 - 2001		84,26,452		
2001 - 2002	**	1,31,53,739		
2002 - 2003	**	76,96,191		
2003 - 2004	**	70,66,831		
2004 - 2005	**	96,72,912		
TOTAL		12,92,17,714	TOTAL	12,92,17,714

Bar Graph showing percent of Income spend towards infrastructure, health, education, livelihood, administration and miscellaneous programmes





References

- All, Salim and H. Whistler.** 1942-1943. The birds of Mysore. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 43: 130-147, 318-341, 573-595; 44: 9-26, 206-220.
- Aravind, N. A., D. Rao, and P. S. Madhusudan.** 2001. Additions to the Birds of Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary, Western Ghats, India. *Zoos' Print Journal.* 16 (7): 541-547.
- BirdLife International.** (2001). Threatened Birds of Asia: The BirdLife International Red Data Book. (eds. Collar, N.J., Andreew, A.V., Chan, S., Crosby, M.J., Subramanya, S. and Tobias, J.A) BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK. 3083 pages.
- Buchanan.** 1807. Journey through Mysore, Canara and Malabar: p. 415.
- De, Ananda Mohan.** 1996 Anubhav: Experiences in Health and Community Development -Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra, Voluntary Health Association of India, New Delhi
- Ganeshaiah, K. N. and R. Uma Shaanker.** 2003. A decade of diversity. ATREE and UAS, Bangalore.
- Ganeshaiah, K.N. and R. Uma Shaanker (editors)** 1998. Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary: Natural History, Biodiversity and Conservation. ATREE and VGKK.
- Gowda, C. Made** (Unpublished Thesis). Tribal participation in LAMPS of Chamarajanagar, Karnataka
- Islam, Z. and A. R. Rahmani.** 2004. Important Bird Areas in India: Priority areas for conservation. Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai, BirdLife International, UK and Oxford University Press, Mumbai
- Karthikeyan, S., J. N. Prasad, and T. S. Srinivasa.** 1995. Yellowthroated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus* (Jerdon) at Biligirirangan Hills, Karnataka. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 92 (1): 123-124.
- Koppad, K.D.; Burman, B.K.R. and Kurup, A.M.** 1961. Census of India Monograph Series Part V-8(IV). Office of the Registrar General, India, New Delhi.
- Morris, R. C.** 1927. A junglefowl problem. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 32 (2): 274.
- Morris, R. C.** 1936. Vultures feeding at night. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 38: 190.
- Morris, R. C.** 1939. On the occurrence of the Banded Craike *Rallus c. amauroptera*





and the Malabar Woodpecker *Macropicus j. hodgsonii* in the Biligirirangan Hills, S. India. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 40 (4): 763.

Narayan, R. 1999. Community Health - Search for a New Paradigm, Health Action Nov. '99 issue

Negi, R. S. 1967. Sickle cell trait distribution in India. Ph D thesis, Calcutta University

Padmanabhan, S., Rao, S. and Kundaji, Y. (2006) Forest Alive! Environmental Handbook for teachers in Biligirirangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka. ATREE, Kalpavriksh, VGKK

Park, K. 2000. Park's Textbook of Preventive and Social Medicine, 16th. ed. Banarasidas Bhanot Publishers, Jabalpur

Prashanth N.S. The traditional knowledge of the Sholagas and a participatory approach to biodiversity conservation (forthcoming).

Prashanth, N. S., and Ramachari, H. (in press) Soliga Forest Pharmacy, Sacred Mountains, Precious Forests: Environmental Handbook for educators on B.R.T. Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka, ATREE, Kalpavriksh, VGKK

R. Siddappa Setty, K.S. Bawa and J. Bommaliah. Participatory resource monitoring for non-timber forest products in Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple wildlife sanctuary, Karnataka, India pp 85-88 in K.S. Bawa and Uma Shaanker. Tropical Ecosystems: Structure, Diversity and Human Welfare. Oxford Press-IBH, New Delhi, India.

Ramasamy, S., Balakrishnan, K., & Pitchappan, R. M. 1994. Prevalence of sickle cells in Irula, Kurumba, Paniya & Mullukurumba tribes of Nilgiris (Tamil Nadu, India).

Ramesh, B. R. 1989 Flora of Biligirirangan Hills. Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Madras University, Madras.

Report of The Independent Commission of Health in India 2000, Voluntary Health Association of India, New Delhi.

Shanker K, Hiremath A, Bawa K 2005, Linking biodiversity conservation and livelihoods in India *PLoS* 3(11): e394.

Shyamal, L. 2003. A short trip in the Biligirirangans. Newsletter for Birdwatchers 43(5): 66-67

Somasundaram, H. N. and Kibe, R. V. 1990, Soliga - the Tribe and its Stride, Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra, BR Hills.

Srinivasa, T. S., S. Karthikeyan. and J. N. Prasad. 1997. Faunal survey of the Biligirirangan Temple Wildlife Sanctuary. Merlin Nature Club, Bangalore.





Srinivasan, U. and Prashanth N.S. (2005): Additions to the Avifauna of the Biligirirangans. *Indian Birds*. 1(5): 104-105.

Sudarshan, H. (in press). Health care in India, Prabuddha Bharata, Sri Ramakrishna Mission, Kolkata

Sudarshan, H. 1997. Tribal Health Care System, Healthy Mind, Healthy Body, Vedanta Kesari, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai

Sudarshan, H. 2001. Karnataka - Towards Equity, Quality and Integrity, Report of the Task Force of Health & FW, Govt. of Karnataka

Sudarshan, H., & Sridharan, V. S. 1995 Tuberculosis control programme in rural area: experiences from the field. *Health Millions*. Jan-Feb;21(1):49-52.

Sudarshan, H., 2000, Health of the Tribal People – Broad Policy Framework, Consultative Workshop on Tribal Development, NABARD and BAIF Development Research Foundation

Sudarshan, H., Yoganarasimhan, S. N., Keshava Murthy, Sudha, R. and Venkataram, B. S. 1993. Medico-botanical Studies of Biligirirangan Hills, Mysore District, Karnataka, VGKK & Department of Science & Technology, New Delhi

Tiger Task Force (2005) Joining the Dots, MoEF Govt. of India.

Uttangi, J. C. 2000. Ornithological tour of B. R. Hills Wildlife Sanctuary at K.Gudi. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 40 (4): 45-47.

www.atree.org 1999. Conservation and Management of Biodiversity: Perceptions of Soligas, ATREE



*Special thanks to
Supraja Foundation*

We thank Mr. Trivedi and family and Mr.Kashinathan for their deep concern for the development of tribal people and their invaluable, substantial and continued financial support.

Prakruti



Natural Products from B.R.Hills

B.R.Hills

B.R. Hills, Chamarajanagar District,
Karnataka - 571 441, Ph 08226-244025

Bangalore

686, 16th Main, 4th 'T' Block,
Jayanagar, Bangalore - 560 041
Ph : 080-26347612

Mysore

VGKK Technology Resource Centre
81-82, Mysore - Ooty Road,
Near JSS Arts College, Mysore - 570 006
Ph : 0821-2480077

No.65, Gurikar Devanna Street,
1st Cross, Fort Mohalla, Mysore - 570 004



Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra, B.R.Hills, Chamara Nagar - 571 441, Karnataka